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From Dreams to Waking.

BY E. LYNN LINTON.

CHAPTER I.

HER IDOLS.

"CHILD! your imagination will be your ruin. You live in a world that does not exist, and you see nothing as it is. I am sorry for you, for I know too well what you will have to suffer. But who can give another reason and common-sense! We must all dress our own weird, and yours will be a heavy one!"

The speaker, Miss Morris, flicked out her flounces with a hopeless air, and, passing her hand over her eyes, sighed heavily. There was as much fretfulness as sorrow in this sigh; temper having the trick of pain, and a look of suffering making a very good mask for the feeling of displeasure. But Miss Morris, though observant, was not introspective, and had never come to that knowledge of herself which the sage said was the last and most difficult attainment of wisdom; hence she honestly believed that she was sorry, and not in the least "put out," when she deprecated, as so often before, this inconvenient activity of fancy which made calls on her sympathy to which she could not respond.

The child, of whose bewildering imagination she spoke so plaintively, was her niece, Venetia Greville, a slender, fair-faced girl of seventeen, with a certain dreamy look in her large blue eyes, and that kind of settled sweetness in her smile which seemed as if she smiled more from what she thought and felt than from what she saw and knew; so far justifying her poor fretful, sickly, timorous aunt in her disclaimers, and, as she prophesied, threatened in the future that sorrow that comes to all dreamers before they wake and realize.

Those dreamy blue eyes, that settled sweetness of smile, were true tracings of the hidden writing. Venetia did live in a world of her own—which was by no means the world of ordinary human habitation—where she saw beauty that did not exist; virtue that her own mind only created; love-worthiness, greatness, nobleness, where were not even the shadow of live things; where she made gods out of the clouds in the sky, and gave her worship to mist-wreaths that faded away as she looked.

Nevertheless, she was not as yet discouraged; and when one little cloud-god melted away and was lost, she created another which did as well. For among the needs of her young soul, that of enthusiasm about some person or some thing was the most imperative. This need had already led her into some troubles and a few follies, earnest of graver sorrows in the future when the *besoin d'enthousiasmer* should have given place to the more fatal *besoin d'aimer*; when the creation of an ideal for whom she should

sacrifice herself, not only admire as from a distance—the worship of a god to whom she might bring the living incense of her love, not only watch as he floated through the sky—would be the terrible law of her life; when what was now the mere phantasy of her imagination would be then the main fact of her being.

As it was, her troubles had been comparatively slight and her follies unimportant; all the same, she had the one and committed the other. Thus: last holidays, when she was sixteen, she had idealized the gardener's young daughter, a pretty, clever, facile kind of girl, who, she persuaded herself, was a genius in the rough, like one of the great of the earth born in obscure places, of whom she had been reading; a genius wanting only the aid of a friendly hand to strip away the rugged envelope and let the nobly-fashioned soul go free. Full of this fancy, she had insisted on teaching the girl all that she herself knew, including music and drawing, French and physical geography. She made her holidays seasons of real hard work to herself and of infinite penance to Letty; till, tired out of her life by her lessons, and getting past the age when bread and jam rounded off the possibilities of human enjoyment, she went of her own accord as a nurse-girl at Farmer Rust's; and the last thing heard of the potential Hypatia, the hypothetical Vittoria Colonna, was that she had been seen flaunting through the streets of Belton on a market-day, hanging on the arm of a recruiting sergeant, and, young as she was, evidently in that state when pewter rings like silver. Miss Morris, who had never much liked the girl, and who cordially detested all Venetia's crazes without having the courage or the energy to repress them, was cruelly delighted to tell her of these very coarse and clumsy feet of clay that had shown themselves beneath the petticoats of her genius. But poor Venetia cried herself sick, and to the last believed that Letty might have been made something of, if only the right way had been taken, and the right person had taken it.

Another time she persuaded her aunt to take into the house, and give fair trial to, a plausible, smooth-tongued, crafty young scamp, who came that way one bitter winter's evening, and told a pitiful story of a good place lost through the death of the mistress, and the impossibility of finding another without a character. He was put into buttons, and made the page-boy of the establishment, much to cook's disgust—and cook knew the world as well as most. But he did pretty well, and was really handy and useful, till he bundled all the silver into the best table cloth, and decamped in the night, never to be heard of again.

At school she had made an idol of Georgie Lawless, a big, lazy, imperious girl, who loved no one but herself, and treated poor adoring Venetia as living idols do treat their worshippers, nearly breaking her heart by her caprices and her cruelties; in preparation for the time when heart break would be a more serious matter than it was now. And she had done her best to idealize her aunt. But Miss Honoria Morris was scarcely cultivable ground even for such a persistent enthusiast as Venetia. A peevish invalid with a sharp face



"I HOPE I SHALL BE ALLOWED TO CALL ON YOU TO-MORROW?" ERNEST ASKED, AS HE HANDED VENETIA THE BOUQUET.

and a grating voice, very querulous, very selfish, very prosaic, could scarcely be made into a saint or heroine, try as hard as one would. Nor was her malady, which was liver, to be regarded as of those ethereal and refined sicknesses which are assumed to make folks liker to the angels than they are ever able to be when in good health and with pure blood. Neither could the girl exalt the pro-motherhood—for which her aunt received a handsome income, and got rid of her charge by sending her to school for nine months out of the twelve, and giving herself no kind of trouble about her for the three during which she was at home—into a subject for enthusiastic gratitude or poetic eulogy. There are things at which even the folly of youth becomes wise, and this was one of them. Wherefore, after a time, during which the girl had wrought hard to grow flowers on nether millstones, Aunt Honoria was laid aside like an old doll, and Venetia did what she could without her.

The present occasion of the girl's delight and the woman's rebuke was the prospect of a certain school-fellow, one Graziella Despues, a creole, who had been sent over from Cuba to the Misses Wynter, at Noon Lodge, to perfect before bringing out. Venetia had heard from Kate Grant, a girl whose parents were in India, and who had no holidays, that the new arrival with the pretty name was the most beautiful, delightful little darling that had ever been seen.

She wore ear-rings and rings, brooches, chains, charms, and necklaces, like a grown-up woman, said little Kate, who already loved finery and possessed none; and she went out every morning and picked two flowers, one for her hair and one for her dress, and the Misses Wynter only smiled and said nothing; and she talked the sweetest kind of broken English, and talked incessantly, all about Cuba and the lovely things that they had there—the flowers and fruits and trees and birds; and she had such eyes and such eyelashes—and was only about five feet high, with a waist that did not quite measure eighteen inches; and, finally, that she, Kate, was so much in love with her!—and so would Venetia be when she saw her, for she was ever so much nicer than that great big Georgie Lawless. Which was mean of Kate, who was Venetia's shadow; seeing that she too had worshipped at the Lawless shrine together with her model, and, until the arrival of Graziella, had held her supreme over all her rivals.

All this was enough to set the active imagination of Venetia in a flame, and to give her another idol in the clouds. A child of the sun, dark-haired, dark-eyed, who dressed herself in jewels and flowers like a daughter of the Incas, and had a name that was a poem in itself; a creature so beautiful as Kate described, so fascinating and good and delightful altogether as Venetia imagined, how should she not love her? how not make her on the spot her goddess to be worshiped, her queen to be obeyed? In one half hour she had created an ideal, as she had created others before; and she counted the days between now and her return to school as a lover counts those which stand between him and his beloved.

"Oh, auntie, fancy! a beautiful little thing from Cuba; from that lovely country, that exquisite place!—why, they call it the Pearl of the Antilles!" she had said, enthusiastically, after she had read Katie's letter. "How delightful it will be! She will be like a fairy among us all."

For which outburst of baseless delight she had received the rebuke which begins this chapter, though the sole effect that it had on her was to send her back on herself, and to make her dreams silent instead of audible.

If Venetia's imagination had pictured the future in gold so far as her new school-fellow was concerned, the reality of things brought her even more than she had anticipated. Graziella was the kind of a girl to have warmed into activity a deader fancy than Venetia's. What, then, did she not do to one already disposed by temperament and that terrible "need" to find her a living poem, a human flower, a heroine out of a novel, a grace, a muse, a saint, and an angel all in one?

Beautiful in a strange, foreign way, but beautiful exceedingly; with dark eyes surrounded by a fringe of lashes so long that they swept her rounded, olive-tinted cheeks; a mouth like a rose-bud; hair soft, thick, and black as night, falling to her feet when she let it loose; a figure as slight as the traditional sylph's, but of such exquisite proportions as made all others look coarse or meagre according to the line on which they differed; with a half-hidden fire beneath her graceful indolence; a passion, indicated rather than shown, penetrating her sweet caressing softness, which gave her that appearance of latent strength and unexplored possibilities, so attractive, so compelling, so mysterious to the imagination—Graziella was soon the queen of the school, but reigning over none more arbitrarily than over Venetia. Her heart had gone down before the lovely little Creole as it had never yet gone down before any one; and she transacted in little and in school-girl travesty the great drama of love which she was destined to enact in more serious fashion hereafter.

But things were not always smooth between the two friends; and, indeed, it was only the sweetness of Venetia's temper and the absolute sincerity of her devotion—the entire forgetfulness of herself and the delicate tact taught by truth and love together—that made matters bearable. For though Graziella had many virtues—the virtues which belong to a nature passionate and not ungenerous—she had a vice that went far to destroy all the good of these others, and that made her love more often a service of pain than of pleasure. She was jealous; fiercely, unreasonably, wildly jealous; jealous as only a Creole can be jealous—that is, as a savage for suspicion and a wild beast for cruelty. But she had fewer outbreaks with Venetia than she would have had with any one else, because of this saintly devotion, this faithful absorption and hourly dedication, which it was almost impossible for the most perverse ingenuity to distort or misunderstand. Sometimes, indeed, there were tremendous acts of trouble and tragedy to go through; but, on the whole, this school-girl romance brought as much happiness as it gave pleasure, for if the one was blessed in her worship, the other was charmed to be worshiped.

So the days passed through summer and autumn, winter and spring, when Venetia, having reached the magic age of eighteen, was taken from Graziella and Noon Lodge to meet fortune and the future in the great world at home. The Creole, two years younger than the English girl, had to be kept for another twelve months under the Misses Wynter's fostering wing, when she too would be pronounced fit to fly on her own account, and to be eligible for balls and liable to lovers.

Of course it was a tremendous grief to Venetia to leave her young queen in the durance from which she, for her own part, had escaped. Though she disliked Noon Lodge, and did not love the Misses Wynter, she would willingly have postponed her "coming out" for a year, so that she might have kept with Graziella.

But fate is stronger than love, and the sacrifice had to be made. It was agreed, however, that the Creole, who had only friends—no acknowledged relations—in England, should spend half her holidays at Oak-tree House with Venetia and Miss Morris; and with this the two friends had perforce to be content, and make the best of things as they stood. And as even Aunt Honoria—poor, peevish, sickly body!—was, in a certain sense, fascinated by the pretty little Cuban, the holidays were to be times of great delight. Meanwhile Venetia went out and enjoyed herself, and Graziella wove her spells around others of her companions as well as around her teachers, so that she succeeded in getting more pleasure and less learning, more holidays, more indulgences, more caresses, and fewer lessons, fines, or admonitions, than any other young lady in the establishment. It was a way she had—a way which no one yet had been found able to withstand, and which had, so far, brought her what she wished, and satisfied all her demands. It remained to be seen whether, when fairly launched into the flood of life and the unknown, she would

be able to steer her precious bark as deftly as she had steered her toy boat, now in the pond and shallows; if she would be able to make men her slaves as she had hitherto made her girl friends her servants, and compel from them the love and adoration which she had won from these others; if she would be still queen of her world, supreme, dominant, and confessed; or—would she have to yield at times to others?

CHAPTER II.

IMITATION.

THE return from school and formal "coming out" of a pretty girl of confessed amiability and a good fortune is an event in a community which equals in importance the appointment of a new curate, or the arrival of a crack regiment with an unmarried colonel at its head. It is a kind of lottery, where the sanguine see their success, and the timid fear their failure; but where each man who has the necessary conditions of celibacy and heart-wholeness is sure to think that fortune is impartial and chances equal, and that the prize is as likely to be won by himself as by another.

This was the feeling which Venetia aroused among the youth of Belton Forest, where they all lived. She was the biggest prize of their local matrimonial lottery on the female side of the lucky-bag, and every unmarried man of the district—from little Tommy Clarke, the doctor's son, to handsome Charley Mossman, of Belton Chace, through the gradations of Mr. Roughton, the curate, with a hundred and twenty pounds a year, and Captain Blakey, with his half-pay, grizzled beard, and fifty years of experience—had his dreams about Venetia Greville, and his speculations as to whether it was worth his while to decide on making her his wife or no. Before she had been three months at Oak-tree House she had received five offers of marriage. Five sane and stalwart English gentlemen had thrown themselves at her feet and besought her to bless them with her hand, each swearing that it was for love of her own sweet person only, and all with tongues discreetly silent on the Three per Cents, where her fortune was invested; though, to do them justice as men of business, all had turned their eyes that way, and had studied the money article in the *Times*, and decided on the investments that he would make when he had the control of things, and he had raised the three per cent. to six.

Venetia, however, did not see her hero in any of the five, which was a blessing, though rather a surprise to her aunt, knowing as she did the girl's fatal facility for idealizing, and the extreme likelihood there was of her investing with every kind of heroic attribute some common-place creature with a good manner and fluent speech, who should strike the key-note of her character cleverly and gain her heart by deluding her imagination. But nothing of this had happened yet; the girl's fate was still to come.

It came before long; how should it not? Writing school-girl love-letters to Graziella, and going out to such balls and picnics, such lawn parties and water parties as were given in the neighborhood, was all very well; but even when alternated with spells of dry study on the off days, and a sincere love of music and painting at all times, they were not interests of such dimensions as necessarily excluded others. On the contrary, the more the girl's nature was stirred, the more likelihood of deeper movement when the chance came. And so it happened when Ernest Pierrepont came down to pay a visit to Charley Mossman, his old Eton friend and college chum, and the bachelors of Belton Forest gave a ball to the neighborhood, with Venetia Greville, the mistress of Oak-tree House, as the queen and acknowledged belle.

Any one might be forgiven for idealizing Ernest Pierrepont. Even elderly women learned the trick, and men themselves were not exempt. It was not only that he was handsome—Charley Mossman was that too, and Captain Blakey, though grizzled and fifty, had once been an Adonis,

and was a "fine figure of a man" still; nor was it only that he was clever—Mr. Roughton, the curate, had been a double-first, and, like some one else more famous, had forgotten more than any one else in the place had ever known. If Ernest Pierrepont played on the flute divinely, so did little Tommy Clarke; if he sketched like a master, so did James Butterworth; and as for athletics, great as he was in all manly sports, he had his equals and his masters among the young men of Belton Forest; so that it could not be on this account that he was accepted as king of his company wherever he appeared.

No; it was for something far more subtle, far more indefinable; for a certain grace of manner, a charm of voice, a chivalrous deference to women which yet did not put him at odds with men with whom he was *bon camarade* on all points; for the most perfect sweetness of temper; for a tact so delicate as to be almost a sixth sense; for a pleasant power of talk which was bright without being gaudy fireworks, animated and not noisy, interesting and not scholastic; and, above all, for an appearance of curiously graceful guilelessness which set people at their ease at once, and was so far removed from the ordinary bluff British honesty which treads on your toes without apology, and slaps you in the face without regret, as was his breeding from that of a country haw-buck, or his person from that of a good-looking prize-fighter. In a word, he was a hero ready made to hand; a young Apollo whom nymphs and goat-herds might adore, and who, while accepting his position, gave no sign that he smelt the incense which, for his own part, he burned as liberally as it was offered.

"You must present me, Charley, to your fair friend Miss Greville," he had said, as they drove to the ball; and Charley, who was really smitten, as the phrase goes, said, "Of course," joyfully thinking that now he should have a friend at court who would sound his praises judiciously, and make Miss Greville understand his merits better than she seemed to have understood them as yet.

He had no fear of Ernest on his own account. He had always understood that there was an attachment between him and a pretty cousin, with paternal consent refused because of the relationship, but which was an effectual barrier to any other *affaire*, and so rendered him safe under the head of rivalry; else, perhaps, he would not have said "of course" so joyfully, nor even have asked him down to Belton Chace at all. As it was, however, as soon as Venetia and her aunt came into the room, he went up to them with his friend and presented in due form Mr. Ernest Pierrepont to Miss Greville.

A waltz was just beginning, and Venetia's card was clear; there was no reason, therefore, why she should not be whirled away on the arm of Charley Mossman's friend, though Charley had designed to dance this first waltz with her himself—had expressly saved himself for it—had been looking forward to it for some days as a thing that should somehow mysteriously advance him in the difficult path of her good favor, and make them happy—he scarcely knew why. But Ernest, in that unconscious innocent way of his, took her from under his very eyes, and Charley was left to console himself as he best could for his disappointment.

Had it been any but Ernest, that disappointment would have been very bitter; but his fidus Achates, his friend and prospective champion—well, if not himself, this other was the next best that could be found. And with this Charley comforted himself, and waltzed with Emily Backhouse instead of with Venetia, which at least pleased one of the persons concerned. For Emily Backhouse had a tender heart, and Charley Mossman had once set his seal on it; a little carelessly, perhaps; but the impression remained, and poor Emily did not seek to rub it off.

Venetia had never enjoyed an evening as she enjoyed this. Ernest Pierrepont seemed to consider himself specially told off for her service, and Charley Mossman shared his duty. This did not trouble her, though it made poor Emily uncomfortable enough; for the young heiress liked

the good-hearted squire, with his frank English face and pleasant voice, and had somewhat idealized him into her brother in a hazy kind of way—a distant and indistinct relationship which she did not care to make clearer, but which set her at her own ease and him feel not the least in the world at his. He would have been better pleased if she had been less friendly, and the brotherly quality which she found in him was the last that he aspired to possess. But Mr. Pierrepont—ah! that was another thing altogether. He was something that she had never seen before, and that she prized accordingly; for what virtue is so great as that of novelty?

The varied experiences of travel, proficiency in art and music, love of poetry and literature, a handsome face, a sympathetic voice, a charming manner, deferential, flattering, full of that subtle sense of manly protection and personal submission, of intellectual supremacy and the confession of moral inferiority, which is, above all others, the most delighted in by women from men—it was impossible that Venetia, romantic, enthusiastic, with the need of hero-worship woven in with the very fibres of her being, and just at the age when the sentiments are stronger than the perceptions, should not find her hero in Ernest. Here, it seemed to her, was the culmination of her ideal, the highest perfection to which the modern man could reach. A man who had shot lions in Africa and studied art in Rome; who had met the redskins on their war-path in Nebraska and acted French proverbs in a Parisian salon; who spoke of a Polish princess with a sigh and of an English countess with familiar affection; and who now treated her, a country girl just home from school, as if she had been a princess herself, raising his beautiful eyes to hers with that look of courteous adoration and tender respect for which he was famous among the women who knew him—was it to be wondered at if she let her fancy go free, and, led by its flickering light to unsafe places, made for Mr. Ernest Pierrepont a temple where she placed him on her pedestal as the Best whom the chances of life had as yet sent her? Had she been asked, she would have added—or could ever send her!

They talked of all sorts of things; or, rather, Ernest talked and Venetia listened. It never occurred to her that the exploits of which he told her so simply, so much as matters of course, looking for praise no more than if he had said that he had walked down Regent street on a fine May morning, were based on but slender foundations of fact, if embellished with a large amount of that which was not fact; that his hair-breadth escapes had been adventures wherein the danger had been infinitesimal and the way of escape a good broad cart-road, with stout hedges on either side; and that the only lions which he had ever seen were those in the Zoological Gardens. But then he had really missed the chance of making one of a sporting party for the interior of Africa, which two of his friends had joined; so if not the rose, he had been near it; and he took their true adventures as good models for his false ones. All this was unknown to her, and she would not have believed any nineteenth-century Ithuriel who had told her. And as Ernest was not all bad—if vain and untruthful, a flirt and insincere, neither malicious nor evil-hearted—she had none of those mysterious instincts which are said to belong to the sex in its years of simplicity by way of protection against ignorance. Hence she gave herself *tête baissée* to belief, and with belief to admiration.

"I hope that I may be allowed to call on you to-morrow?" Ernest said, with his sweetest air, as they finished the last waltz, and he was taking her a small promenade in the lobby before handing her to her aunt.

Had the ball been held in a private house, with a conservatory attached, he would have taken her there; but being in the large room of the principal hotel, there was nothing but a passage flanked with flowers for the more tender episodes of the evening.

"We shall be very happy to see you," answered Venetia,

her eyes on the ground. "Do you stay long at the Chace?"

She held her breath to hear his answer. She scarcely realized how sorry she would be if he should give back a negative.

"That depends," he said, looking at her almost as if he were asking her a question. "There is nothing special to call me away at this moment, and there may be something to keep me here."

Venetia smiled. "I am glad of that," she returned, girlishly; and looked up with a pair of bright blue happy eyes, which just then seemed to him the loveliest that he had ever seen in woman. Even the Polish princess, of whom he spoke with a sigh, even the countess so familiarly dear, had no such eyes as this sweet flower-faced country girl, this nymph in white silk and pale blush-roses, who looked up into his face smiling, and said so frankly she was glad that he was not going away soon.

"And I am glad too," he said, in a rather lower voice than was necessary; but it gave a meaning and emphasis, which was what he desired. "I have found too much to enchant me to care to leave Belton Forest just yet."

"It is a very pretty country," said Venetia, embarrassed, she scarcely knew why.

"Very; but I was thinking of the people, not the place," said Ernest, always in the same low tone of voice, as if the hydrangeas and dracænas lining the walls were so many unfriendly ears which he must baffle if he could.

Venetia felt that she must say something. It was difficult to know what; but difficulties have to be conquered, and thoughts must be dug for if they will not come up of themselves.

"Yes," she said, looking vaguely round toward the ball-room door, "we have a very nice society here."

"I do not know much of society; I only know that some people here are more than nice, are delightful, enthralling, enchanting," he returned, and though Venetia was only a school-girl yet, and neither vain nor conscious, she could not be so stupid as not to see that he meant her to take this to herself, and to believe that it was her society that he eulogized so warmly.

"I think we had better go to my aunt," she then said, with a perceptible trouble in her face and eyes.

Though it was pleasant to admire this wonderful stranger as the hero of her dreams, the embodiment of manly excellence, she was not in any way desirous that he should admire her. That would have implied a higher degree than any that she had yet taken in the initiation through which we all have to pass; for to such a nature as hers, imaginative and impersonal hero-worship comes long before the need of loving, while the need of loving comes long before that of being loved; which, indeed, with women of Venetia's stamp is never at any time so strong as the other.

"I will take you," answered Ernest, who knew his alphabet too well to go too fast, and who understood the signs of the girl's timidity as well as he understood those of a woman's fervor.

On which the two walked demurely to where Miss Morris was waiting for her niece in the cloak room; and Mr. Pierrepont made no further advances, unless it might be called an advance to say, "I shall do myself, then, the honor of calling on you to-morrow," as he handed Venetia into her carriage, dextrously leaving Miss Morris to poor Charley.

There was little doubt but that he would keep his word. Easily attracted, but eminently unstable, each new face seemed to him the loveliest of the series; and though none had yet been found strong enough to hold him, he had always a floating idea that here, in his latest beauty, he had at last found his fate. He thought so now with Venetia Greville, and blew his cigar smoke into rings, which somehow reminded him of the pretty little fringe on her forehead, though there was no kind of a resemblance between the two, and saw the pure forms of her profile outlined in all sorts of incongruous things, and wherever he turned.

Evidently he was what men call hard hit; but he kept his thoughts to himself, and Charley Mossman did not see which way they tended.

The next day, then, both young men went off to Oak-tree House to inquire if Miss Greville was very much fatigued after last night's ball, or if the known delicacy of Miss Morris had been increased by the cares of her chaperonage and the lateness of the hour to which those cares extended. They found the one alone in the garden, the other in her room and invisible; and each in his heart did not bless the peccant liver which revolted against a vigil prolonged to four o'clock in the morning, and by which he was denied the chance of the *tête-à-tête* that he had hoped for. For Charley, Orestes, had determined to maneuver so that Ernest, his Pylades, should take the old lady off his hands and leave him with the young one; and Pylades had determined the same thing on his own account—with more likelihood of success. For between the two men, the balance of skill in the more delicate tactics of life certainly hung to Ernest's side.

Not much was to be done, however, by either at the present moment; for each doubled on the other, and spoiled the running which he could not make for himself. If Charley talked of next season's hunting, and hoped that Miss Greville would come to the covert side, Ernest dextrously threw the conversation into art, and suggested a day's sketching in some picturesque spot of which he claimed to be the discoverer. And Charley could not sketch, though Ernest could hunt.

When Charley spoke of getting up a water party, Ernest seconded him enthusiastically; but turning to Venetia, said:

"Ah, Miss Greville, you should have been at the last boating excursion that we made from Naples; a large party of us in quite a procession of boats, with flags flying, and that sweet Italian music! The sea like lapis lazuli, the sky like one large opal, the splendid-looking fishermen, with their brown skins and picturesque dress, the girls with their magnificent faces, figures like so many goddesses, and eyes that were as bright as stars—that would have pleased you! Color, costume, climate, flowers, music, beauty—all the accessories perfect, and just such as would have enchanted a born artist, as you are!"

The consequence of it was that a water party in grey and sombre England suddenly became to the girl's mind the very epitome of dullness, and that life seemed nowhere worth having save in beautiful Naples.

"See Naples, and then die," said Ernest, dreamily.

"Better see it, and live there ever after," said Venetia, as dreamily.

"Ah! give me old England! There is no place like home," cried Charley Mossman, vigorously. "England is the only country fit for a gentleman to live in!"

"And the dungeon for artists!" sighed Ernest.

Venetia sighed too; she scarcely knew why; but it seemed infinitely sad to her, first, that Mr. Pierrepont should feel England to be a dungeon at all; and next, that, feeling it to be so, he should be imprisoned in it. To her, too, it seemed at this moment as if the sun never shone here; that we had no flowers, no fruits, no sweet odors, no pleasant savors; that we had never produced a poet nor an artist—nothing but blacksmiths and plowboys, a few unimaginative young landed proprietors, and elderly ladies who suffered from congested livers. She looked at Ernest pityingly.

"Yes," she said, with a prettily pathetic air, "England is, as you say, Mr. Pierrepont, a dungeon for artists."

"And the veritable assassin of poets," he interrupted.

"Yes," she assented.

"But the home of men!" said Charley Mossman, a little scandalized at the tone of the talk. "Why, Ernest," he continued, "you are not a renegade to your own country, old fellow, are you? Have the foreigners spoiled you so far as this?"

Ernest smiled. There was a kind of compassionate superiority about his smile which Charley felt rather than saw.

"Improved me, you mean," he answered; "made me understand the worth of things rather than the unreal value of places—the grandeur of life, of humanity, of thought, rather than the narrow conception which we call patriotism. That is how I look at it, Charley."

"And I don't," said Charley, curtly.

Briton of Britons, England was the ultimate to which national perfection could go, and he felt a slight on the mother country as keenly as a personal insult, and, indeed, almost as a personal insult. But Ernest was his friend, and he could not be angry with him without graver cause than this.

"But Mr. Pierrepont has traveled," said Venetia, gravely, raising her eyes to Charley's, and speaking with a certain intensity of remonstrance that had its effect.

This beautiful young man, who talked so sweetly on art and poetry, who had seen Naples, and made boating excursions with Polish princesses—he knew; and who was Charley Mossman, only a dull young English squire, that he should contradict?

"Travel is not everything, Miss Greville," said Charley, a little hotly. "We have history too."

"But Mr. Pierrepont knows history as well as we do, and foreign countries better," answered Venetia; and then remembering that she was in point of fact constituting herself the advocate of this comparative stranger, she stopped and blushed, and added, "But really I am interfering in what I do not understand, and giving my opinion where I know nothing about the matter. Let us talk of something else—something that we shall agree on, and not have half a dozen ideas all clashing together."

Which charming little womanly diversion each young man read according to his desire. Charley, that she did not want to oppose him, her old friend, in preference for a stranger; Ernest, that she did not wish to let her preference for him, a stranger, be too plainly seen by her old friend. Of a truth, Orestes and Pylades were playing odd cards to the lead!

After this the conversation languished. Retreat after the excitement of a skirmish seems often more dull than restful, and the young men were half afraid to show how dull they felt it by breaking into sword-crossing again. Soon after, they took their leave, and Venetia found the day strangely heavy and oppressive when they had gone, and concluded that a storm was somewhere about—it was so lifeless, heavy, still; and then she wondered what a storm would be like at Naples, and pictured the boating expedition of which Mr. Pierrepont had spoken, and wished that she had been there.

CHAPTER III.

UNEQUAL PLAYERS.

WITHOUT occupation or imperative duties, possessed of sufficient fortune to enjoy life in his own manner without thought or care for the future, if not rich enough to place himself among country magnates by the purchase of a large estate, Ernest Pierrepont had no other will to follow but his own, no other person to consult but himself.

Hence, when he found that life was pleasant at Belton Forest, that Venetia Greville was more unsophisticated than the Polish princess, better tempered than the dear countess, and more beautiful than either, he decided on taking a house for the summer, and installing himself as one of the desirable bachelors of the neighborhood—as an experience.

He had never lived in the country—being essentially a town-bred man—and he thought that it would be good fun to give six months to the bucolics, as he called them—always excepting Venetia in his somewhat disdainful gener-

alization, thanks to her fair face, sweet smiles, golden hair, and big blue eyes—and by the end of the time he would see what he had made of them and himself.

He knew one thing—that he would make love to Venetia after his own fashion. It would not be that vulgar, unmistakable kind of love which, according to him, is fit only for commonplace souls—thick-witted heads, destitute of poetry or delicacy of touch. No, it would be refined, subtle, suggestive love; love that should tantalize without satisfying; that should allow itself to be inferred rather than commit itself to confession; love that should pass over the girl's heart like the wind over an Æolian harp, awaking sweet sighs, responsive melodies, in return; that should be like the sun on an opening bud, causing it to expand to its full perfection, to give out all its hidden perfume, all its secret beauty.

It was delightful to him to see her innocent face change like an April sky at his pleasure—become grave or gay, radiant or overcast, as he talked of life now with the melancholy of a man whose heart is in the grave, the somber hopelessness of a philosophy which has its roots in sorrow; now rolled out fine words and glittering ideas, vague, but all the time suggestive of beauty, of misty delight, no one knew why; of enthusiasm for no one knew what; but, by this very vagueness, appealing more powerfully than if they had been more distinct to a mind so dreamy as Venetia's, so capable of erecting fairy palaces out of egg-shells.

Assuredly this was not the ultimate purpose for which Charley Mossman had invited him to the Chace; but Charley, though inwardly annoyed at the sudden determination of Pylades, was an honest-hearted, generous kind of man, and held the doctrine of the best to win, like a true English gentleman as he was.

If Ernest did really love Miss Greville, and that affair of his with his cousin was all off, he thought, a little ruefully, and more than a little inclined to call himself ill names for his folly in asking him to the Chace at all—but if he did really love her, and if she loved him—well, there was no help for it; he, Charley Mossman, was not going to be muffed enough to break his heart for the loss of any woman in the world, nor cad enough to envy his friend the treasure which he had known how to win; by which it may be seen that the handsome young squire's condition was not desperate, and that Emily Backhouse had still a few "lives" to the good.

Here, then, we have him, our handsome, agreeable, poetical *jeune premier*, installed at Acorn Bank, which the Hardmans, to whom it belonged, had been glad enough to let while they took their pleasure in Switzerland for the summer—notwithstanding Mrs. Hardman's fears for her furniture, and Mr. Hardman's reluctance to include the use of a shabby dog-cart and a broken-down cob in the list of appliances and appurtenances for which he received about ten times their market value.

And it was extraordinary to Venetia how, since this arrangement had been made, the sun had seemed to her to shine every day, and the sky to be as blue as, surely, the sky of Italy itself. How glad, how happy, she was! she used to think every morning when she woke smiling, as at a friend, at the broad daylight streaming through her room. What a delicious day this has been—what a blessed thing it is to live! she used to think, with half a sigh, as she looked out on the stars for her last pleasure, and saw the lights of Acorn Bank shining in the distance, and remembering all that Mr. Pierrepont had said to-day, and of the meeting that they were to have to-morrow at the old mill—for sketching, nothing more. If she had been required to give a reason for her happiness, she would have been hard put to it, poor dreamy, enthusiastic Venetia! But youth does not reason, dreamers do not verify the truth of their visions, and enthusiasm contents itself with belief—passing over proof as altogether needless.

This old mill was one of the most picturesque features in the whole of the picturesque Belton country. The artist

world had long known it, and more than one great man had tried his skill there in the contest between art and nature, the imitator and his original, wherein the former is so sure to be worsted, and the latter so inevitably the conqueror. But to Ernest Pierrepont's view of things it was quite the other way. He had always found nature a very docile sitter, he used to say, laughing, and by no means an untranslatable original. All that you want is a poetic imagination and technical skill; to be able to see correctly—so few people see, he would add, looking into the distance, with his fine eyes fixed as if they indeed saw everything—and when you have learned to see, then to transcribe courageously. This was all—surely nothing so very impossible!

And once, when he had said this, he turned round to Venetia, and added, in his sweet voice:

"Your eyes are made for seeing—seeing, I mean, in the artistic sense. Nature will keep no secrets from you; she gives them lavishly to all the souls who love."

"And I do love nature!" answered Venetia, with sudden embarrassment. She wished that she had said some other word instead of love.

Ernest smiled.

"How prettily you said that!" he exclaimed, in his graceful, guileless way. "It is such a charm when a woman speaks well," he added, to poor Venetia's intense confusion, and a strange mixed kind of feeling, more pain than pleasure on the whole.

This was as they were walking through the wood to the mill, where they were to have an hour's sketching, and where Miss Morris was to have accompanied them. But Miss Morris had large ideas about trusting the young, and putting them on their honor, and all that kind of thing, whereby she secured herself her afternoon nap, and saved herself from fatigue by throwing Venetia into peril of something worse than fatigue—into peril of a broken heart and a ruined life.

"You will make me vain if you flatter me," she answered, shyly.

"Shall I?" was his response. "Would my words have so great an effect on you?"

It was in Venetia's mind as the right thing to say, "Any one's flattery would;" but her heart drove back even this very mild rebuke, and the utmost to which she could come in the way of rebuke was:

"You have seen so much more than I; it is no wonder if your praise would have an effect on me."

"Oh! then I am only a living railway ticket, an embodied lecture on the physical geography of the globe?" he said, in a tone of disappointment and half banter together.

She laughed confusedly, but her eyes were moist and tender. Had she really hurt him? She would rather have hurt herself ten times over.

"I do not hold you quite like this," she said, a little humbly; and Ernest, for reasons, did not wish to press his victory too far.

"Thanks!" he cried, pleasantly, and they went on for a while in silence; and when they began to talk again it was on indifferent subjects, till they came to the mill which they were to sketch in concert.

"This is just the day for us!" then said Ernest, as they settled themselves on the low stone wall facing the river and the ruined mill; there where they got the best view of the old wheel, with grass and moss growing on its broken flanges, of the stately elm-tree shadowing both brook and building, of the thatched roof, starred with yellow stone-crop and rose root, with the swallows flying about their nests in the eaves, and the cattle standing knee-deep in the quiet pool. "And just the circumstances," looking at his companion tenderly.

"Yes, just," answered Venetia, looking at the cows, but thinking of him.

After a pause, during which the two had arranged their boards, tried their colors, and sketched in their leading

lines—careful, timid, and correct, as to Venetia; bold, clever, and wrong, as to Ernest's—the latter said, apropos of nothing:

"There is no true genius without strong sympathies. To understand, one must feel; and one can not really feel without the power of living, as it were, in the mind, the soul, of another; seeing through his eyes, loving as he loves, shrinking when he shrinks. Genius is in its nature universal; but only because it is sympathetic. It grows by love. The more the poet, the artist, loves, the higher is his genius. Nature recognizes her own, and she gives tenfold for all that she receives. Is it not so?"

"Yes," said Venetia, with a hushed kind of reverence in her voice.

Talk such as this was the spirit that led her into enchanted regions, nameless, formless, but none the less beautiful because they were not understood. All that she knew, all that she cared to know, was that when Ernest spoke to her like this, his melodious voice a trifle veiled, his eyes looking far before him, as if he, the spiritual seer of poetic things, discerned more than the grosser sort could see, his face as if radiant with the light of a nobler world than dullards such as Charley Mossman could reach, her soul seemed rapt away to heaven, where it floated in glory in the midst of beautiful forms and faint, delicious music, making her almost sad, poor deluded dreamer! with the intensity of her vague delight.

"How exquisite it is to be understood!" then said Ernest; turning his beaming eyes from the spirit-world where they had apparently been wandering, on to the fair piece of humanity by his side. "I have never yet met with one who seemed to understand me so well as you, Miss Greville. I have never seen any one with such noble sympathies—such superb spiritual melodies."

Venetia blushed, as her manner was, almost to tears.

"You are too indulgent to me," she said, timidly. "I, who am only an unformed country girl, cannot deserve this praise from a man who has seen and known all that you have," she continued, unmindful of his little rebuke so lately administered about the living railway ticket and the embodied lecture. "It is your own kindness to say so."

"Pardon me, it is your own merit," he answered. "It is because of the very breadth and depth of my knowledge of life that I do say so. And if I, who have seen so much of the world, hang up my wreath against your door, you may be sure it is because I know that it is deserved."

By which it may be seen that he too had forgotten it.

Venetia could not answer. To disclaim a compliment is sometimes more painful to modesty than to let it pass in silence. She did not want to have the appearance of arguing with Mr. Pierrepont about her own perfections; so she merely hung her head a little lower over her drawing, and wished that he would not talk of herself at all; and yet, though painful, it was a pleasant pain.

"That is the word," continued Ernest—"superb spiritual melodies. Others, of course, know more of life than, thank Heaven! you do, Miss Greville. We do not want our snow-drops, our sweet May-buds, our violets, to be like flaunting poppies, like gaudy tulips, like bold, self-evident peonies. And there are dreadful creatures who are scientific—logical reasoners, God help them, and us!—but nowhere have I met with so much exquisite sensibility, such a true artist soul, such a lovely poet's heart."

"You are very good," murmured Venetia, oppressed with the desire to kneel at his feet and tell him, on her side, how great and noble and superior she thought him. But something that was not wholly spiritual held her back; and all that she could do was to feel embarrassed, and to look divinely lovely, but somewhat foolish.

More of this kind of thing went on during the two hours given to the sketching of the ruined mill, and Ernest found the time not ill employed. It was a pretty pastime that might lead to something more serious, who knows? He must be caught and caged some day, and Venetia Greville might as well be his captor and jailer as another, if she

suites on further acquaintance. Meanwhile it pleased him to make love in this vague and undefined manner.

It committed him to nothing, and added to his store of knowledge, already considerable, as to the best way of dissecting a woman's heart without wounding his own. For one peculiarity of Ernest Pierrepont's nature was that, however hard he might be hit, he was never really hurt; another, that his fancies invariably cooled on further knowledge, instead of growing warmer; and that the more he made a woman love him the less he loved her.

And all this while Venetia worshiped him as her hero, the embodiment of her highest manly ideas, and believed in his absolute sincerity as much as he believed in her absolute simplicity. It was an unequal match in the game of love; but such matches always are unequal where one plays with coolness and knowledge, and the other has only faith and fervor as the rules by which hearts are thrown away, and the best trumps forced and lost. Faith and fervor, indeed, have been at all times impedimenta in the warfare of life. Seeing which some women fling them away, altogether; and we can scarcely blame them.

There had never been so gay a summer at Belton Forest as was this. Every week something fresh and delightful was set afoot—chiefly by Ernest Pierrepont and Charley Mossman—to which the neighborhood gladly subscribed its attendance, and bought its pleasure at small cost. Of course Venetia was always one of the most desired and desirable guests, if Aunt Honoria but rarely appeared—shuffling off the burden of her chaperonage on to any pair of matronly shoulders that would accept it, and even letting Venetia go under the escort of the young men alone rather than give herself the trouble of going with her.

The neighborhood had naturally made up its mind as to the state of matters between Ernest and Venetia, and busied itself in conjectures as to when the marriage would take place. They were all sure that something was on foot, and that the two were engaged—or ought to be. There was no doubt as to the direction of their feelings—at least of hers, said the dowagers, severely; and nothing but an engagement could justify the attentions which the one paid with such marked devotion, and the pleasure which the other showed in accepting them.

Wherefore it was put down as a settled thing; and people began to ask each other whether they should congratulate Miss Greville before a formal announcement, or was it more proper to wait until the signal had been given by the authorities themselves? The women who had sons generally voted on the side of waiting; also a few who had daughters—with a forlorn hope not yet beaten back that things had not gone quite so far as this, and that Jane and Mary, Ellen and Susan, had still a chance—went with them. But the majority of the mothers with marriageable daughters, for whom husbands were scarce to find, were for shunting Miss Greville as soon as possible. Even if she had secured a prize for her own hand, she would be one rival the less for them if she was once fairly out of the way.

Meanwhile Venetia on her own side never gave it a thought whether she was engaged or not. She had come to the knowledge by now that she loved this man, this hero of her dreams realized in the flesh, with her whole heart, her whole strength; and she was as sure of his love for her as hers for him. Could he be her hero and deceive her? Though he had never said anything definite, distinct, yet his voice, his manner, had told her all. He had suggested too much and too clearly not to mean her to understand him. She did not dishonor him so far as even to argue in her own heart whether such and such things were or were not. She knew; she was conscious; she trusted; she believed; she loved; and she was sure that she was loved.

So matters stood, when Graziella Despues wrote to her dear friend and sister Venetia, telling her that scarlet fever had broken out in the school, and that it was by Miss Priscilla's desire she wrote to beg for an asylum at Oak-

tree House, if her darling's love could bear such a test—she, Graziella, having no place on earth to go to, as her guardian was abroad, and she was thus practically homeless.

"It is a great shame of Miss Wynter to have scarlet fever in her house!" cried Miss Honoria, sharply. "And very inconsiderate to ask us to take Graziella. Good gracious! if she brings it with her, why, we might both take it and die!"

"But the poor little thing might take it and die if she stays there," said Venetia; "and that is more likely than that she should bring it with her to us. I don't see how we can possibly hesitate, auntie. It would be murder if any thing happened to her."

The beautiful blue eyes filled up with tears. With her capacity for love, she could never be unfaithful to the old because of the new; and not even Ernest himself could make her forget Graziella.

"Did I say that we could?" returned her aunt, snappishly. "You always jump so absurdly to conclusions, Venetia. Of course Graziella must come, more especially as she has been invited already, and her visit, in the natural course of things, would have taken place in a few weeks. I only say that it is very wrong of Miss Wynter to have allowed scarlet fever to break out, and that in my state of health it is a dreadful risk to run—dreadful!"

"Oh, I hope there'll be no danger, auntie," said Venetia, lovingly. "We will take all the care possible, and perhaps no harm will come."

"At all events, you will be satisfied to have your idol here, and if I have to suffer, I have; that is all," answered Miss Morris, with an angry sigh. "So let us say no more about it. You are so fond of making a fuss, Venetia."

With which she settled herself to her knitting dourly, while Venetia, feeling herself dismissed, went off to write to her friend, begging her to put herself in the train without a moment's delay and come off to Oak-tree House, or rather to her home—underlined three times—where she knew that she was more than welcome, and where—story-telling Venetia!—they had no kind of fear. She had had scarlet fever ten years ago, and auntie was too old to take it. So the doctor said when it was raging at Belton the summer before last, and there was, of course, no danger now—ending the letter with a great deal of love and verbal caressing, and putting in a postscript the salient point of all: "We have a new resident here for the summer, a Mr. Pierrepont—Ernest Pierrepont—whom, I am sure, you will like, and who is sure to like you. We see a great deal of him."

This was the first that Graziella had heard of her dear friend's last enthusiasm, Venetia having kept back her confidence on this matter with a reticence wholly unlike her usual self; in consequence of which, when she read this last announcement, Graziella, who, girl as she was, had more finesse and more suspicion than the average woman, and who was infinitely more developed than her years, thought at once there was something in it, and was prepared to find that something out.

"How sly!" she thought, as she read the letter, a deep flush burning on her cheeks. "So this is what all her professions to me have ended in at last. I was to be her dearest friend to the end of her life. I was her favorite, her second self, her beloved; and here is this stranger, a person she has known only a few days, who has taken her away from me. But I will show her what I think when I get there, and let her feel that I see and understand her treachery." Then her thoughts took another turn: "I wonder what this Mr. Ernest Pierrepont is like?" she said to herself, leaning back on the garden seat where she was sitting, half closing her lustrous eyes as she watched the birds that came and went about her feet, and the shadows that fluttered on the flower-bed opposite. "Perhaps he is handsome; perhaps he is in love with Venetia." She sighed. "I wonder if he is?—and I wonder if he will like me?"

It was one of those curious coincidences in life, of which

there are so many, that at the moment when Graziella said these words to herself, Venetia was speaking to Ernest about her beloved friend, detailing her virtues, her beauties, her charms; and the Backhouse family were thrown into a state of the most intense excitement by the information that their half-brother, Colonel Camperdown—the son of Mrs. Backhouse by a former marriage—was coming home from India on sick-leave, and would be at the Elms in about a week's time from this.

Here, then, was a new shifting of the kaleidoscope, a new shuffling of the cards; characters incorporated into the drama at present enacting which might change the whole face of things, and turn the current of events into a totally different channel.

CHAPTER IV.

GRAZIELLA.

"SWEETER than ever!" was Venetia's first thought of her pretty little friend, as she met her at the station, and Graziella appeared at the door of the carriage, with her indolent grace and helpless air, part appealing, part commanding, as if she expected heaven and earth to come to her aid, or, at all events, men of all sorts to give her a helping hand. "How glad she was that the dear little thing had come!" thought again the loving, good, unselfish heart, as the Creole was safely lifted from the carriage and deposited on the platform by the master himself. "What a delightful summer they would have together—Graziella, Ernest, and herself? Could any thing be more perfect?"

As they drove home, Venetia's lap encumbered with her friend's multitudinous wraps and belongings, while in Graziella's were some of the most beautiful flowers to be found in the Oaktree garden, her thoughts carried her into a rose-colored heaven, where she saw themselves as a triad of faith, love, and friendship: Ernest loving Graziella partly for her own sweet sake and partly because she, Venetia, loved her so much, and Graziella loving Ernest for the same cause and in the same way. And she herself? She stood between the two as the link and partaker on both sides; happy, oh, how happy! for the love that she bestowed, for the love that she received, and for that of which she was the blessed and believing medium.

But while she dreamt this, Graziella, looking into her face smiling and silent, as if her love were too big for words, her happiness needed no expression, thought, for own part. "I wonder what we shall do this year? I hope it will be amusing; but the people here are rather mopy, and Venetia herself is mopy too. And I wonder what this Mr. Pierrepont of hers is like, and if he is very much in love with her, and if he will admire me? I should think he would. Venetia is not looking very well, I think. That hat is not becoming to her; mine is a beauty; and I know that I am just now in my best looks."

Aloud she said: "Darling, dearest Venny, how glad I am to be with you again, and how sweet it was of you to have me! What a happy time we shall have together, just like the old days when no one had come between us!"

"And no one has now," Venetia answered, tenderly. "Oh yes, there has!" sighed Graziella. "No one can love two people exactly alike; and I am not the first with you now, as I used to be."

"You are, Gracie; you are," said Venetia. "Am I?" said the Creole, with a sudden light in her eyes. "Shall I put you to the test?"

"You might; I should not fail you," answered her friend; and Graziella, sliding her hand under Venetia's arm, clung to her caressingly, and said:

"And I believe you, Venny—my own Venny now and always."

"Now and always," echoed Venetia, who, having no portion of that strange sense of hidden things known as second-sight, believed Graziella's spoken words in their own

tirety, and knew nothing of those left unsaid in the cradle of the thought. Alas for the poor dreamers who build their world out of the mist and the rainbow, and do not see the precipices and the quicksands of their feet!

Belton Forest had seldom been so rich in social novelties as it was at this time. It could scarcely be said that either Ernest Pierrepont or Venetia had palled on the people as yet; while Graziella, who had been here once before when she and Venetia were mere school-girls and not out, now came before the world as a beautiful young lady in the position of a prize, and with possibilities of fascination unfathomed and unknown.

Then there was Colonel Camperdown at the Elms; practically a stranger, though he had been born here, and all the world that was old enough remembered him some five-and-twenty years ago as a troublesome young scamp in the tadpole stage, with a smile that took the heart clean out of the women, and that made even the men forgive his delinquencies, which were many; with a curly crop of bright brown hair, and a pair of honest eyes that looked up frankly into your face while he confessed to some boyish enormity with that unflinching honesty which earns a thrashing oftener than does the half-hearted whine for pardon of a coward.

All the world too remembered his going through the regular gradations from tadpole to pickle, and all the rest of it, till he emerged into his final condition as a smart young officer who flashed into their dull world once or twice, like a nineteenth-century Apollo disguised as Mars, when his local light was suddenly eclipsed by that inexorable War-office, which sent him off to India as one of the Cornelia's gifts of which the mother country is so prodigal. Now, when he came back at thirty-three, with bad health and an illustrious name, he came back as one practically unknown; one whom the neighborhood was proud to honor, and whom those who were so inclined might put in unfriendly contrast with Mr. Ernest Pierrepont. For whatever the merits of this other might be, he had not that passport to the consideration of a country community of having been known to the people from his birth. And we all know how very much superior to every kind of foreign potentate are the local *aristoi*, even of the lowest degree.

Somehow, though there were other possibilities and other *dramatis personæ*—e. g., little Tommy Clarke, the doctor's son, who played Schumann and Chopin with real feeling and comprehension; Mr. Roughton, the curate, and, as some one once called him, a very "dungeon of learning;" Captain Blakey on half-pay, though with fifty years at his back, admirably preserved and a fine figure of a man still; the Backhouse girls at the Elms, and the Fenton boys at the Limes—every one felt that the real interest in the social drama enacting and to be enacted for the summer did and would lie in Venetia and Ernest Pierrepont, Graziella and Colonel Camperdown. Perhaps Charley Mossman might be thrown in to make the running, as they say on the turf, with Emily Backhouse as the consolation prize of failure; but the true drama would be played out by these four. How would they act? Would they fit themselves together according to the arrangement assigned by common consent, or would any two of them perversely try for the same *role*, and thus destroy the balance of forces as at present constituted, and create confusion in the plan of order? This was what remained to be seen; and meanwhile the curtain drew up and the play began.

The feasts of our ancestors have left an indelible impress on us, their descendants; and the libations which it was obligatory on the old heathens to pour out to the gods are transferred, by survival, to the throats of our friends. Colonel Camperdown's return was, therefore, the signal for a succession of dinners and suppers, where each house would regulate its bill of fare after the same set pattern, and where the company would be as little varied as the dishes. And the one who headed the series was Charley Mossman. The married people were somewhat disconcerted by his precipitancy; and more than one lady said that it was a great piece

of presumption on his part; and that, if he had understood the world and the proprieties as he ought, he would have waited until the rector, or some one of like authority, had sent out invitations before he had taken it upon himself to give Colonel Camperdown a dinner. He was always putting himself forward, that young man; and really some one ought to take him down and give him a lesson. Nevertheless, those who hit him hardest behind his back accepted his invitation "with pleasure," and his dinner promised to be as great a success as the ball had been before it.

Among the guests were, of course, Ernest Pierrepont and the two girls from Oak-tree House. This was the first time that Graziella and Ernest had met, or that Colonel Camperdown had seen this third member of the triad—Venetia's holy alliance, in which she believed with such touching good faith, such pathetic power of idealizing and making beautiful that which was her own creation only, built upon the slenderest foundations.

As the host's most intimate friend, Ernest occupied the place of "mistress" in the middle of the table, opposite the well-looking, good-natured young squire. He had assigned to him one of the dowagers; but to make amends, Graziella, fairy-like, exquisitely beautiful Graziella, had been placed on his other hand. In spite of his generous sentiments about the best to win, and the like, Charley had indemnified himself for the social exigencies which had burdened him too with a dowager, and the most awful of them all, by giving himself Venetia on his left. Perhaps under this arrangement lay a half unconscious hope that the race was not quite over, and that Graziella might—who knows?—effect a diversion. Ernest was notorious, y fickle, and he, Charley, did not think that there was a real engagement between him and Venetia. It might be; but he did not think it. Apparently, to himself however, he placed Venetia on his left as the respect due to the heiress of the place, and so was able to eat his dinner with a clear conscience.

Meanwhile Colonel Camperdown, at the head of the table, surveyed the feast which had been made for him with an air of general benevolence. Inwardly he asked himself why he should be required to give himself an indigestion because he had come from India in shaky health and his towns-folk were glad to see him; but outwardly he was resigned and amiable enough, and soon found his interest in looking at Venetia and Graziella. They were beautiful enough to attract any man; and the colonel was far too true a gentleman to be indifferent to the charms of women. It is only churls who are that. And as he had just come home, and was as yet profoundly indifferent to local politics, save where he knew the people, he had heard nothing of the under-current of things, and would not have cared if he had been told. He had not fathomed his half-sister Emily's liking for Charley Mossman, nor Charley's now-waning, now-rekindling, devotion to Venetia. He knew nothing of the unspoken affair between her and Ernest Pierrepont, which the world had settled to its satisfaction long ago; while he was ignorant who was this pretty little dark-haired creature, with eyes like dusky stars, a waist that a man could span with his two hands, and that look in the face which seemed as if she was destined to make the sorrow of those who loved her—that look which belongs to the women who have passion, coquetry, jealousy, love of love, and the need of supremacy, but who all the time lack truth and depth—that look which burns the hearts of men like fire, but which never gives them peace.

He gave, however, a good deal of silent attention to the two girls, rather to the loss of his immediate neighbors, whom, being uninteresting, he somewhat neglected; and before the dinner was over, he made out two things, for which he took to himself the credit of a discoverer: one, that this good-natured host of theirs admired Miss Greville immensely; the other, that Miss Greville did more than admire Mr. Pierrepont. For the pretty little dark-haired, bright-eyed stranger he had no difficulty in finding a theory to fit. She belonged to Ernest Pierrepont. It was the

necessity of circumstance—the appointment of fate. The two had that sure but indefinable affinity which goes by the name of being made for each other. And Colonel Camperdown believes in affinities.

Miss Greville, with her sweet, pure face, was not, so he thought, “made” for this handsome but, to him, not fascinating young man. There was something about him that struck Harold Camperdown—a man of the world, but an upright gentleman as well—as not quite straight, not quite real. The lacquer was well laid on; but it was lacquer, it was not gold; and the colonel found it out. It irritated him, he scarcely knew why—only that the best men are small, the strongest weak, in the matter of a pretty woman’s regard—to see the loving glance, the happy, trustful smile, which Venetia every now and then sent across the table to her two friends; while Graziella played off her sweetest airs on Ernest, and Ernest played off his most fascinating wiles on Graziella, till the two got more and more absorbed in each other and less and less mindful to reply to her pretty telegraphy. And who was this young fellow, thought the colonel, in secret displeasure, that he should have for his own share the two prettiest girls at the table, while everyone else had to be content with a dowager or a dowdy? The colonel had the strongest desire in the world to cut out this handsome, but to him artificial and unreal, young fellow in the good graces of one or other of his fair friends; and he looked at both girls critically, as he asked himself which. For the moment he could not answer. He would have to see them a little closer, know them a little better, before he could make up his mind; but he did make up his mind that Ernest Pierrepont should not have both at his feet, and that he would lower his objectionable crest by so much.

Meanwhile, had Ernest and Graziella given words to the main thread of their thoughts, with him it would have been:

“What a beautiful little creature! What a perfect specimen of her kind! How pale my Venetia looks tonight! All the color seems to be washed out of her. She is more lily-like, more statuesque, than ever—very lovely all the same—yet what a delightful contrast this rich color and hidden fire make with her! What a lucky fellow he will be whom this little enchantress will one day love!”

With her the chant would have run simply thus:

“Venetia has deceived herself, poor thing! This handsome man does not really love her, and he will love me.”

In articulate speech their conversation was all about Cuba and flowers, starry nights and burning days; of the children of the sun, and the children of the mist; of the coldness, the fogs, the absence of color and of sunlight in England; of the want of finesse and keen comprehension in the English people—specially in English women, and of these specially in the very fair women; of the eloquence of eyes—dark eyes the most eloquent; of the exquisite gift of beauty—dark beauty the most exquisite; of the strange sympathies of souls, and of the heavenly charm there was in finding something absolutely perfect to one whose nature was so refined, attuned to such superior melodies, as not to be satisfied with anything short of perfection. It was the fountain springing in the desert, the tree in the wild waste that Byron speaks of, and that only such men as Ernest Pierrepont could fully appreciate. And of such men as he there were few to be found—about as few as there were such exquisite examples of human perfection as she.

In short, he unfolded all the well-worn embroideries which he had formerly unfolded for the benefit of Venetia, simply changing the key and color; while Graziella took them up and played with them, turning aside his compliments with a grace, a dexterity, which, to most people, would have seemed, in view of her youth and inexperience, utterly appalling as a forecast of the mature future that had to come.

To Ernest, however, it was enchanting; not the less so because so wholly different from Venetia. He was a good

Catholic in the way of women, and would have blushed to have owned himself incapable of adding to the number of his canonizations. He had never understood why one should hold the way against another; why admiring a blonde should hinder him from making love to a brunette; why, having won the heart of Venetia, he should not try to win that of Graziella. The two things were distinct and different—as different as were the natures of the two girls themselves. Venetia had accepted everything in child-like faith, in simple sweetness of trust; Graziella fenced and parried, and refused either to understand or accept. The one had satisfied the man’s vanity by the surrender of her deepest love, her idealizing adoration, with very little trouble of trying on his part; the other piqued and disowned, and by its very difficulty made the final victory of a thing to be desired and pursued. The one had the facile conquest of a heart; the other was the keen encounter of wits, which at this moment was the more exciting of the two.

Venetia’s love, so frankly given, so ingeniously shown, had been delightful enough to Ernest while fresh and while she was the prettiest girl in the place; and perhaps, had no other distraction turned him aside, he would have finally drifted into an engagement which would not have been entirely his voluntary choice. Now, when she had a rival, beautiful, dextrous, full of subtlety and fire, of languid grace and trenchant words, the softer fascinations of his Beautiful Lady, his Beatrice, his lily, as he used to call her, came to be somewhat pale and tame; and before the dinner was well over the young man had decided that it was absolutely necessary for his happiness, and to maintain the rightful balance of things, that he should make Graziella Después in love with him; when he would be better able to determine how true was his love for Venetia than he could possibly do now without such an alternative.

Nevertheless, he was not minded to lose Venetia’s heart for this adjustment of the balance, this scientific determination of the dynamics of love. If gratitude for love had no more vitality with him than with the average man, vanity had. Wherefore, when he came into the drawing-room in the last detachment of gentlemen and found Colonel Camperdown seated opposite Venetia, talking pleasantly to her while she leaned back in her compartment of the ottoman and answered him with smiles and graceful girlish cordiality, a flood of jealousy rushed over him, and he felt all the man’s natural desire to hold what he had already grasped, and to allow of no rivals near the throne where he had once been seated. Graziella, a little apart, was surrounded by half the young men in the room; but he let that pass. He was suddenly indifferent to her, hers being an affair of the future. The affair of the present was the conversation of Venetia with Colonel Camperdown, and the necessity that he was under of making spokes that should check the play of intrusive wheels.

He knew his power; and when he also drew a chair opposite to the girl, and entered into the conversation afloat between her and the colonel, it was no surprise to him, however soothing to his pride, to see her sweet face brighten from brow to chin, and the trustful eyes raise themselves to his with that look of innocent worship which said so plainly where she placed him and how she held him. He smiled with a certain air of acknowledged proprietorship which set Colonel Camperdown’s teeth on edge, as he bent forward to speak to her with a familiarity of tone and bearing not quite in such good taste as he prided himself on possessing. But Venetia said nothing of the impertinence. She only accepted the familiarity as an affection; and so went home happy—as those who live in fools’ paradises, and whom false love and a mocking fortune cheat into smiles and empty dreams.

Graziella, who had seen and understood the whole of this little comedy, could scarcely be called as happy as her friend. Woof and warp of her character were alike shot through and through with jealousy, with the imperious need of domination. But being young, she had still the

tender germs of something that, with great care and cultivation, might eventually have passed muster for a conscience, and was thus desirous to be a little on the right side of the thorny hedge of honor. Hence, when they reached home, and the evening with its opening possibilities was at an end; while Ernest was making his smoke rings into vapory likenesses of Graziella's lovely little curls—Venetia's forgotten; while Colonel Camperdown was asking her people to tell him about that fellow—who he was and what he was doing here—in a tone of profound contempt and with feelings in harmony with his tone; while Charley Mossman was taking himself to task for folly on the one hand, in that he was running after a shadow which would never take substance and be caught, and for bad faith on the other, in that he was trying to cut out Pylades—Graziella, leaning back in her easy-chair, Venetia kneeling by her side, suddenly raised herself into a sitting posture, broke off their girlish talk on this and that and him and her, and said, abruptly:

"Venny, are you engaged to Mr. Pierrepont?"

At the first instant Venetia thought to say, "Yes." She felt engaged to him; and feeling stands for fact with the poor deluded creatures who are what is called in love. But a moment's reflection made her blush and hesitate. Apparently so simple, it was in point of fact a difficult question to answer—almost impossible, indeed. Was she engaged? Yes and No. But she could not say this Yes and No to Graziella, looking at her so intently with eyes no longer languid, liquid, veiled, but opened to their fullest—burning, fiery, intense eyes, that seemed as if they went down into her very soul.

"Are you, Venny?" repeated the Creole, in a voice deeper than was usual with her.

"Not exactly," stammered Venetia, turning away her head and suddenly becoming very white.

"Not exactly? What an answer! You must be one or the other. Which do you mean, Ven?" said Graziella, with disdain.

"Well, I mean that we understand each other," she replied, looking now into Graziella's face.

"No; what you mean is that you are in love with him, and that he has not made you an offer," returned Graziella. "Has he made you an offer, Ven?"

"Not in plain words," was the answer, spoken with a sudden spasm of pain and dread.

Graziella laughed.

"What a dear, stupid thing you are!" she said, prettily, crouching back in her easy-chair in her old supple, graceful attitude. "You are two years older than I, and ten years younger. I am not a young lady out in the world as you are; I am only a school-girl; but I know things a thousand times better. If Mr. Pierrepont has not made you an offer in plain words, he has not made you an offer at all, and you are not engaged."

"He certainly has not made me an offer," said Venetia, still with that pain about her heart; "but I can trust him, and we understand each other," she repeated.

Graziella shrugged her shoulders.

"If it were my affair, I would rather have it distinct than taken on trust," she said, her eyes flashing with their fierce, jealous light. Then she veiled them beneath their heavy lids and curling lashes, and added caressingly, "But you are quite safe, Venny; no one could take him from such a darling as you are."

"Do you think so?" said Venetia, with a sudden sense of relief. "It is not that, however, but that he is too good and true to deceive me; and he has made me feel that he loves me."

"All the same, he is free, and so are you," was Graziella's reply, made slowly.

"And I would not care to keep him by a promise if he was not kept by inclination," said Venetia, tenderly.

"Ah! you are more unselfish than I am. I would not let anyone go who had once made love to me as you say Mr. Pierrepont has to you," said Graziella, passionately.

"What has once been mine shall always be mine; no other person shall have it or take it from me. You, Venny, shall never have another friend; and the man who has once said he loved me shall never have another lover. I would kill him—and you too, if you did."

"You will never have cause to kill me, darling," said Venetia, smiling. "I could not have another friend like you, and no one could desert you for anyone else."

Graziella laughed softly.

"Well, one day I shall put your prophecy to the proof," she said, in her most caressing manner. "I dare say I shall not die before I have heard some one say he loves me."

"A dozen," said Venetia.

"One would be enough, if *the* one," said Graziella, with an air of resignation.

And then they both laughed and kissed each other, and so parted for the night; Venetia happy as the happiest, quite recovered from that vague dread which had possessed her when brought face to face with the fact that Ernest never had really made her an offer, never had done more than suggest, insinuate, make her believe in his love; Graziella, with a serene conscience, saying to herself:

"They are not engaged, so there is no dishonor in trying."

CHAPTER V.

SHADOWS.

WOULD that sketch of the old mill never be finished? It had been such a pleasant labor of love to the two young people principally concerned, that really they had not the courage to put the finishing strokes to their work, even though they might have found some other such patient sifter for their pastime. The old mill had come to be to Venetia like a sweet and sacred depository of her thoughts, her happiness, her love. She had no wish to leave it for any other; to make, as it were, a second temple that would want something of the holiness, the entirety of this. Wherefore it was that when Graziella came the sketches were still incomplete, and she was thus admitted into the adytum as the third member of poor Venetia's trinity of faith, love, and friendship.

But before they went on the expedition which was to form, as it were, a stage or landing-place in their relations together, Ernest was a great deal at Oak-tree House, where, if he made love to Venetia, he certainly did not forget Graziella, whose power of fascination over him grew daily stronger, and was daily more clearly shown. This was, perhaps, Venetia's happiest time.

It was the fulfillment of her dreams, the perfect satisfaction of her two great affections; and as the intimacy between these two dear ones of her life increased, so did her delight. So far as things had gone yet, she had not the smallest pretext for uneasiness; and she was not of the kind to make pretexts that were not supplied by events. If they liked each other, each loved her, and the harmony of all three was absolutely perfect.

One day, however, Ernest proposed that the old mill should be again "attacked," to see what they could make of its lights and shadows, its bounding lines and tender curves; and, of course, Graziella was now to be one of the sketchers, together with her friend and the "uncommitted" lover of that friend.

"You sketch, of course?" said Ernest, turning to Graziella, after he had made the proposition to Venetia, and Venetia had accepted it with her tender smile and radiant face.

The pretty little Creole, whose trees were like cabbages and her clouds like rocks, whose cows were like rhinoceroses and her men forked radishes, lifted up her lovely eyes, and said, "Oh yes, I sketch, of course," with as much coolness and courage as if she had been a member of one of the water-color societies, and looked to be some day pricked for A. R. A.

On which Ernest professed himself enchanted, but not surprised. He had divined as much, he said, with his flattering smile; which meant that to his mind Miss Despues must necessarily have all the arts as well as all the graces of womanhood—that she must have poetry, intellect, the creative faculty and technical skill, as well as starry eyes, a waist that you could span, adorable hands and feet, hair like a dusky veil, and beauty and perfection all round. After which pleasant little swinging of the censer—Venetia standing by looking at Graziella lovingly, and so glad that Ernest Pierrepont saw her charms so clearly—the two girls put on their hats, brought out their books, and the three set off.

Of course it was only right. Venetia understood that quite well, and had not a reproach to make. Graziella was the stranger and the friend, and Ernest ought to pay more attention to her, than to herself. She was too secure to need assuring; but Graziella—that was different. No, it was quite right; and not a shade of jealousy or distrust stirred the calm lake of her gentle mind when Ernest busied himself with the Creole, chose for her the best place after endless difficulties and as much serious deliberation as if the happiness of a life had depended on the nice conjunction of shade and convenience—arranged her shawl, her book, her lights, and her lines, and devoted himself to her with the same fervor, the same absorption, as he had formerly shown to Venetia.

She, "poor darling," as Graziella repeatedly called her while laughing at the little sacrifices that she was required to make, so far from being exalted and attended to-day, was put under strict requisition for her friend's benefit. Her best sketching pencil, her shawl because it was the softest, the stone which Ernest had brought from some little distance as a footstool—all were begged for Miss Despues by Ernest, and Venetia had no wish to refuse. It agreed too well with her unselfish temper, with her love for the little queen of the hour, with her liking to do as Mr. Pierrepont wished, and with her desire to make Graziella happy; so that this transfer of care only echoed her own thoughts and wishes, and she was glad to see the man whom she loved so kindly occupied with her dearest friend.

Nevertheless, down in the remotest corner of her heart, she wished that Ernest would speak to her a little more than he did—just a little more—not to deprive Graziella, but to be included. If her place was between these two, as she had said to herself, she felt somewhat more crushed than she had anticipated. She was less the link than the obstacle; or rather less the link than the wedge, which was being a little set aside. And again, though no more vain than she was jealous or self-seeking, it hurt the artistic sense in her, the consciousness of truth, to be told that Graziella's botch had the true artistic feeling, while her really good and careful study was too cold, too timid, the shading here wrong, the lines there out of drawing. They had been tender, delicate, suggestive, sweet; but each day had its adjectives, and those which were told off to Venetia to-day were not the choicest.

All this was nothing more than a vague feeling, an unformed thought; like the beginning of pain to a person asleep, and before awaking has brought with it consciousness. She was not suffering actively; she merely felt that something was out of tune, and that she was not quite so happy as usual.

While they were sitting there, Ernest talking apparently for the benefit of both, but in reality addressing himself to Graziella, they heard a foot-fall come softly through the bushes and the bracken by the water's edge, and Harold Camperdown drew in sight, a rod in his hand and a fishing basket at his back, whipping the stream for trout. Seeing the triad sitting there, he left the water and came up to the wall, leaning his arms on the parapet while he spoke to them all, but looked especially at Venetia. Her face, too much the mirror of her feelings for her peace, perhaps for her dignity, though gentle as always—that was of necessity

—was a little saddened and overcast; while Graziella's dark eyes burned and beamed beneath their lashes like one on the secret track of a coming triumph; and Ernest had that air which a man puts on when he is doing his best to fascinate a woman—that air which women love as the expression of his desire to please, and which men among themselves denounce with disdain as "coxcombry." But then men are jealous, and resent each other's successes.

Some contradictory demon put it into Harold Camperdown's head to adopt a flirting manner that was not quite his way to women; to pay compliments of a rather glaring kind to Graziella, half in fun as to a child, half in earnest as to a woman; to praise her sketching—which cost him something—but, though a fine fellow enough, he was no purist, and slipped into the smaller sins without much consideration; to look into her eyes with an admiration somewhat too boldly expressed in his own; while every now and then he gave a more serious attention, a more chivalrous and respectful heed to Venetia, and made her feel, rather than openly conveyed, his admiration. All this irritated Ernest horribly, and all the more so as Colonel Camperdown had a kind of high-handed indifference about him which expressed the most supreme disregard of Mr. Pierrepont's likings and dislikings—a manner which men understood so well among each other, and which even women see plainly enough.

Though Ernest was so sure of Venetia that he had no fear of her wandering into strange pastures, he nevertheless disliked intensely all that looked like interference with his rights, however vague that interference, however shadowy and unexpressed those rights; while, as for Graziella, his newest fancy, and therefore the most coveted for the time, he was even more indignant that any man should presume to trespass here on ground which he wished to fence in for himself, while he took time to consider which of the two he would cultivate. In the days to come he might be glad of some one to take one or other of these two fair ones off his hands, but for the present he wished to keep them both safe and in the balance. Hence he was indignant exceedingly; and to Venetia put on the airs of a martyr a little out of temper, while to Graziella he redoubled all his powers of fascination, and made her feel herself a prize for which two men were contending—the choice left in her own hands.

Colonel Camperdown was not the kind of man to care for the displeasure of any other man in the matter of women, or indeed of aught else; so he flirted with Graziella and talked to Venetia as much as he wished—and a great deal more than poor Venetia liked; and after he had spent half an hour pleasantly enough in this pastime he took his leave, and Venetia's punishment began.

This was the first time that Ernest had been angry with her since their acquaintance—that perilous acquaintance which had ripened into such disastrous depth of love with her!—the first time that a ripple had come on the smooth surface of their intimacy; the first time that she had felt in "disgrace," or been other than his Queen and his Beautiful Lady. It was something so strange to her to watch the change that had suddenly come over Mr. Pierrepont; to see him turn away from her, devoting himself to Graziella with feverish absorption while ignoring herself as if she did not exist; to feel that all her pretty little tender efforts for reconciliation went for nothing, and that, though not rough nor brutal—which was not his way—her hero was decidedly cross and unappeasable, that at first she could hardly take it in. What did it all mean? If she entered into the conversation which he was keeping up with Graziella, he withdrew from it, or answered only exactly so much as and no more than the nicest politeness demanded. If she asked him, as she did once, "Is this right, Mr. Pierrepont?" handing him her drawing-book, he looked at the work coldly, and gave it back to her with an indifferent "Oh, yes; it will do," as if it really did not signify how she rendered that old mill with its broken wheel and mossy roof, as if what she did were unworthy

more serious consideration. But meanwhile he almost oppressed Graziella with his caresses, eager as she was for adulation, and made the contrast in his manner to the two so evident, that those weak and sickly germs of what might have become a conscience were just a little painfully stirred.

Graziella was well content to be the first, as, she said to herself, she deserved to be by virtue of her beauty, but Venetia need not have been made such a very bad second so suddenly. The lower place would have to come, but the descent might have been a little more gradual. Nevertheless, she was not going to quarrel with Mr. Pierrepont because he chose to pay her a little more attention than he chose to pay Venetia, who was a great goose for showing how much she loved him. "It never answers," said Graziella to herself, made wise by temperament if not by experience; so she received all his cares and his compliments with the most enchanting manner of right, and as if she were wholly unconscious of any cause whereby her friend should feel hurt.

This pitiful little comedy went on till the afternoon was at an end—the longest that Venetia had ever spent—would that preliminary sketch of Graziella's never be done?—when the necessities of social existence contained in the dinner hour made themselves felt, and the terribly divided triad had to return home. Even then Ernest did not relent; and when he shook hands with the girls and wished them good-by, he said to Graziella, keeping her hand while looking into her face with an expression of the most intense interest and entreaty in his own, "And to-morrow, Miss Despues? May I have the happiness of giving you another lesson to-morrow? Not that you need much instruction, but I am a little more used to the brush than you." To Venetia he only said, "Good-evening, Miss Greville," coldly, scarcely holding her hand at all.

The consequence of which was that Venetia, being no strong-minded woman who could whistle her love down the wind without much more trouble than she would have in throwing away an old dress when she was tired of it, but being simply a very affectionate, very tender, and extremely feminine girl desperately in love, went up stairs to her own room and cried till her pretty blue eyes were swollen to about half their ordinary size, her dear little nose red and unsightly, and her fair, sweet, flower-like cheeks patched with red and white and green and purple all in the wrong places. Which means that, being unhappy, she made herself more unhappy still, and added personal disfigurement to mental distress.

To all of which Graziella was discreetly blind. But she had never made herself so charming to her friend as she did this evening; never been so thoroughly the little heroine of romance that poor Venetia's idealizing fancy had made her. It did a little toward soothing the unhappy child in this her first initiation into the anguish of love; but it did not do much. The heart is not like a pint bottle, imperial measure, which can hold only so much, and so much, and which thus can not be filled with gall by one when another has poured into it honey up to the neck—which can only love one at a time, and feel only one set of feelings at a time. Graziella was not Ernest, and her sweetness could not undo his displeasure. It simply soothed for the moment in view of Graziella herself; but the sting left by Ernest remained and smarted as bad as ever.

The only allusion which Graziella permitted herself to make to the facts of the day, she made when they were parting for the night. After she had wished her friend good-night, and when she had got to the door of the room, the handle in her hand, she turned round, and said, with a certain under-current of disdain, finely marked beneath the surface tenderness:

"I would not cry if I were you, Venny dear; you will only spoil your face, and do no earthly good to yourself or any one else. If you have offended any one, crying all by yourself will not make you good friends again; and if you have been unlucky enough to fall in love with a flirt, mak-

ing yourself ugly, will not make him constant. Good-night, darling, and don't be a goose."

Which little exordium, touching the spring of poor Venny's troubles, made her cry plentifully for the next two hours, when, weak and sick, she fell asleep and went through a series of uncomfortable dreams.

The next day, immediately after luncheon, Ernest appeared at Oak-tree House, radiant and re-established. He had slept off his ill-temper, and he did not wish to punish his poor Beatrice, his Beautiful Lady, too heavily for what, after all, was not her fault. So he entered the drawing-room where the two girls sat; Graziella, graceful and indolent, curled up on a chair half asleep, slowly fanning herself between times, and at intervals taking up the flowers with which her lap was full, like a second Maimouna; Venetia working hard at some horribly crabbed passages in Jean Paul, the better to distract her errant thoughts—handsome, serene, æsthetic, flattering, delightful as ever. The first glance into his face was sufficient to show Venetia that the cloud had passed; and when he came up to her and took her hand in his, and held it softly, gently, tenderly, as his manner was, and lowered his handsome eyes on her with their old look of admiration, and spoke to her with his old accent of tenderness—that accent which was in itself a confession, a caress—the grave of her sorrow was closed, and her soul went back to the heaven of joy in which it had been living for all these latter weeks. She lifted her eyes to him—those sweet, loving eyes—and a smile that made her look for the moment like an angel, broke over her face as she faintly returned the pressure of his hand, and so ratified the treaty of peace which he offered.

All of which Graziella saw between her half-closed lids, and took her measures accordingly; not by pouting, not by coolness, not by making herself unpleasant in any way, but by the most exquisite sweetness, the most playful good temper, the most fascinating brightness—that was her manner of revenge, the method which she took to break one chain and forge another; and her common-sense told her that it was a more desirable method than the one of coolness and overt jealousy—at least at this stage of affairs.

She was right. That vagrant fancy of Ernest's wandering now here, now there, and never settled any where for long, was more caught by Graziella's piquant indifference than it had been ever troubled by Venetia's frank bestowal; all the same, he loved the latter well to-day, and the three set out to the old mill once more, apparently as well assorted as Venetia's hope and fancy had made them. Venetia was happy in the renewal of confidence and affection between her and Ernest; Graziella was happy in the consciousness of a contest where she would come off victorious; and Ernest was happy—what man would not have been?—with one pretty girl whom he liked and who loved him, and another whom he admired and wanted to make love him. It was the soft and tender twilight and the brilliant flush of dawn in the same horizon; and surely that was enough to fall to one man's share!

They were sitting on the wall, all in high spirits, Ernest paying much devotion to each, when, as yesterday, Harold Camperdown came up the river, fishing for trout. As yesterday, the human attraction on the wall overcame that of the fish in the waters, and the Colonel left the river to greet the sketchers and join in a conversation where, good and gallant as he was, no one wanted him. He talked as he had talked before, with lightness and laughter to Graziella, with interest and respect to Venetia. But this time the Creole, having decided on her action, scarcely answered, and Ernest took no part in the conversation at all, so that the whole burden of the hour rested on Venetia; by which her uncommitted lover made a fair excuse to himself for withdrawing Graziella out of danger, and for leaving the other to herself and the Colonel.

Saying a little abruptly, "The shadows are all wrong for you to-day, Miss Despues, and if you do not mind coming with me, I will show you a lovely nook which, I think,

will make even a better picture than this; we will not be long, Miss Greville," he offered his hand to Graziella, to assist her in the difficult task of putting her delicate little feet to the ground, and the two went off together; Venetia feeling herself this time abandoned, which was almost worse than being somewhat unpolitely snubbed.

She felt herself grow pale as they turned and left. Was her heaven to be closed to her again, and so soon? Why had this man come between them a second time? What had she done that he should trouble her peace so cruelly? Ah, how she wished that he would go, and that she could then show Ernest that she had no attraction for any man but himself, and that none but him had any for her.

But the colonel seemed to have no intention of going. On the contrary, he placed himself in a still more convenient attitude, and his face had a marked expression of pleasure, as if certain uncongenial elements had been withdrawn. Even Venetia, preoccupied as she was, could not fail to see the change that stole over him, and which she wished that she had not seen. It embarrassed her, and made her feel treacherous against her wish to Ernest.

"Has Mr. Pierrepont been here long?" began the colonel, carelessly. But he watched the sweet, troubled face bending over the sketch-book while he spoke, though apparently he was absorbed in pulling off the bells of a fox-glove that grew against the wall, and snapping them between his fingers.

"About two months," answered Venetia.

"Did you know him before he came?" was the second question, still made carelessly.

"No," said Venetia. "He was—he is Mr. Mossman's friend."

"A school friend?"

"Yes."

"I never saw him before I came here, but I have heard of him," continued Colonel Camperdown, picking a fresh ball. "A man in my regiment knew him. I remember all about him now."

"Yes," said Venetia; and she said no more. She did not care to ask this man what he knew of Ernest Pierrepont, what he had heard of him. If true, it could be nothing but good; if bad, then it was a falsehood. All the same, she felt it would be disloyal to ask the question; so she said nothing but went on with her painting, which she was rapidly ruining past redemption.

"Yes," continued the colonel, in a quiet, matter-of-fact kind of voice, "a man in my regiment knew him only too well. He broke the heart of his favorite sister—killed her as much as if he had put a knife to her throat. Ask him to tell you the story of Amy Craven, and see what he will say. It was a bad business, Miss Greville."

"You have heard only one side, Colonel Camperdown," answered Venetia, with energy. "You can have heard only one side. Are you just to condemn one on partial hearsay?"

"There cannot be two sides to such a story," he said, looking at her steadily.

"Mr. Pierrepont might say there were," she replied, with a sudden flash of scorn and anger.

"Do you think so, Miss Greville? Can there be two sides to the story of a man making a girl love him till he had got entire possession of her very soul, then suddenly flinging her off for a fresh fancy whom he abandoned in the same way? Can there be two sides to the history of a man who goes through the world ruining the happiness of women with no more compunction than an entomologist has in catching butterflies? Mr. Pierrepont's history is well known; and no man who had the smallest regard for his sisters, his daughters, or his wife, would allow him free access to his house. Fortunately for my sister Emily, she has not touched that miserable thing he calls his heart. If she had, I tell you, Miss Greville, I would have shot him before I would have let him tamper with her as he did with poor Amy Craven. Men know what word to give

to such a man; it is scarcely one to be said before ladies."

"Then it is not one to be hinted at before me, who am Mr. Pierrepont's friend," said Venetia, looking at the colonel as steadily as he looked at her.

"You are loyal," he answered, tenderly, but very sorrowfully. "I admire you, Miss Greville; but I am sorry for you, bitterly sorry."

"You have no cause to be," she answered, proudly.

"Poor girl!" he said, softly. "Remember, I have warned you."

"I thank you, but I repudiate your warning," was her reply, her head still held high and her eyes fixed on his.

She said this just as Graziella and Ernest turned the corner, and Ernest finished a long speech about the daughter of the sunny south in these words: "If I had to paint my ideal of a woman, she should be small, dark, soft, yet full of passion and fire; she should have foreign blood in her, and be eminently un-English; she should have eyes like yours, Miss Despues, and hair like the dusky night—as yours is; hands and feet as small as yours; a voice soft and low like yours; and she should come from some beautiful island in the southern seas, bringing with her the sweet association of flowers, sunshine and beauty."

"What a charming person she would be!" said Graziella, simply, as they came in sight of Venetia looking at Harold Camperdown fixedly in the face, their arrival making her crimson with a strange, guilty blush, as if she had been caught in some fault.

"What a bold man Colonel Camperdown seems to be!" then said Graziella, under her breath, as they drew near; and Ernest answered, viciously:

"He is a cad."

Soon after this the colonel wished them all good-day, and went on up the river with his fishing, when the shadows suddenly found themselves right, and the sketching continued with vigor. But Ernest, struck by that fixed look of Venetia's into Harold Camperdown's face which he caught as he came up, and staggered for a moment into the doubt, Was she absolutely safe after all? did not repeat his experiment of yesterday. On the contrary, he had never been more charming than he was now. It seemed as if he wished to wipe away to the last faintest line the remembrance of the displeasure which had caused her so much pain; as if his love wished to atone for his jealousy. So Venetia read it, and in her reading made herself blessed as of old.

Thus the hours passed without a flaw; and even Graziella, jealous and exacting as she was, did not grudge her friend the attentions which she was beginning to regard as her own dues. She judged Ernest by herself, and took it to mean the careful covering of a tender plant, the intentional hypocrisy of a man who does not wish the truth to be seen just yet.

It was the right thing to do at this part of the play, she thought, approvingly; but soon there must be a change in the method, if things were to go smoothly between them. A triumph, to be a triumph for Graziella, must be one transacted in full view of the public.

CHAPTER VI.

UNCERTAIN WHICH.

AFTER this little brush of jealousy on the part of Ernest there was, as it were, a lull in the affairs of the Holy Alliance, when it might have seemed as if Venetia's fond idea had really some ground-work of reasonableness in it, and was going to work well for all concerned. The three were forever together; and for some days, owing to the marvelous ability of Ernest, who could make love to two girls, bosom-friends and inseparable companions, yet not allow either to be jealous of the other, and to the loyal trustfulness of Venetia, which rendered impossible for her to

suspect what was not clearly displayed before her eyes, the harmony of their relation was as remarkable as it was charming.

The subtle tact of the one, and the innocent acceptance of the other, sufficed during the first days for even Graziella's jealous exclusiveness and passionate desire of public supremacy. Ernest made her understand in a thousand secret ways that she was his light and his life, his queen and his poem, his idol and his beloved; only he could not say so just yet in the market-place, because of certain obstructive reasons why; but it would come—it would come; and Venetia seemed to acquiesce in this transfer of attention and poetic idolatry from herself to her friend, and even to carry her own love and increase of tribute to the little queen of the day whom they both desired to honor. For, as Graziella argued, she could not be such an absolute idiot as not to see that Ernest paid her—the Cuban—as much devotion as he had ever given to herself; and if she was not jealous, then she must be acquiescent; and if not vexed, nor sad, nor sorry, then pleased, or, at best, indifferent. So things went merrily forward; and all three were satisfied, if two of those three were deceived.

The summer was at its height, with burning days, but evenings fresh, cool, and delightful, when the young men and maidens of the Forest turned out from boudoir and smoking den, garden and drawing-room, for rowing parties on the river, for riding parties through the woods and lanes, for impromptu dances got up at small expense, less trouble, and much pleasure at one or other of the houses in the neighborhood.

It was the merriest time the place had ever known, and years after would be remembered as the ideal summer—the summer *par excellence* of all the summers that had ever been or ever would be—the summer when Mr. Pierrepont was at Acorn Bank, and that beautiful little Miss Despues was staying with Miss Greville at Oak-tree house, when Colonel Camperdown had come home from India, and when everybody was marrying everybody—at least in public belief. At all events, when Mr. Pierrepont was marrying Venetia Greville almost as certainly—according to the world which ruled the fate of individuals and nations alike at the Forest—as if he had been already called in church, and was only waiting now for the cake to be baked and the ring to be bought.

But by degrees the neighborhood began to take umbrage at the postponement of its prophecy; to think things badly managed and itself most shamefully tricked; and to find in Graziella a possible cause of hinderance to what, now that there seemed so be a barrier slowly rising in the air, it declared was the most perfect marriage that could be made, and one that every member of the place had wished, foreseen, and done his or her best to help forward.

Soon it began to wonder which of the two girls this omnivorous young man meant to take at last; for the astutest observer would have been puzzled to say which he did really prefer. It wondered, too, how Venetia liked his divided attentions and evident admiration of Miss Despues. But, after all, that was no affair of theirs, said the neighbors, with more anger than philosophy in this repudiation; and if Miss Greville chose to put up with only half a lover, and had no dislike to share him with her friend, that was her look-out, not theirs. It was to be supposed that she knew what she was about, and had her compensations.

Still, they did not approve of it, and thought that it would be more becoming in the young man if he did away with all this uncertainty, and married and settled once and for all. This kind of irresolution, and now one and now another, till no one could make out which, was not their idea of a love affair at all; and they made no scruple of saying so—when well out of hearing of the principals. On-lookers are so impatient at the slow progress of events! They want all the histories in which they take an interest to be transacted by telegrams; and delays, so far from whetting their curiosity, only sharpen their annoyance.

But Mr. Ernest Pierrepont evidently did not mean to hurry himself in his choice. He enjoyed his position thoroughly, and did not care to curtail it.

But slowly and almost imperceptibly things began to change a little—just a very little. Graziella's jealous need for triumph and confession began to be a trifle unappeasable by secret assurances of the uncommitting kind, and Ernest had sometimes hard work to keep her in good humor, yet not blow the whole thing prematurely into the air; Venetia began to feel as if a kind of veil made of cobwebs, but all the same a veil, was being slowly woven between her and Ernest; and Colonel Camperdown began to come to Oaktree House so often, and to join the three inseparables so unfailingly whenever they appeared in public, that the world in its turn began to make guesses as to "which?" in his favor, just as it had already made the same guess in Ernest's. But the Colonel's outward manner being as impartial to each, before folk, as was Mr. Pierrepont's, conjecture had a fine time of it, and assurances were positive as the ignorance on which they were founded was absolute.

Nothing annoyed Ernest more than this intrusion into their circle of a man whom he felt to be in every way his superior, and the only one who had the power to make him uncomfortable. He wanted to be absolute master of his own domain; to hold those two young hearts in his power—waiting on his word—until, if ever, it should please him to make up his mind which he would bless with his final choice; and the frequent presence of a man like the Colonel, handsome in the best manner of masculine beauty, high-spirited, straightforward, honorable, disturbed him more than he cared to acknowledge. Charley Mossman he could afford to despise—as he phrased it in his own mind, "give him long odds and beat him"—but Harold was another kind of rival altogether, and of him he was sincerely afraid.

He was the more vexed and perplexed because he could not say any thing. Even to Venetia he did not dare to show jealousy or annoyance; for this would have implied more than he wished her to understand, as things were—his ties with her loosening daily, those with Graziella becoming daily tighter. All the same, he was disgusted and annoyed, which helped not a little in the spinning of that cobweb veil slowly weaving between him and Venetia.

Coming one day to Oak-tree House with a copy of Longfellow in his pocket, he found Harold Camperdown already before him, seated on the sofa beside Graziella, while Venetia was on a low chair fronting them, reading poetry to the two girls from a book in manuscript. Now reciting in all its forms was one of Ernest's special acquirements. He acted, declaimed, read poetry to perfection; and this art, and singing, were not his least effective vehicles of love-making. Consequently he looked on the colonel as a poacher, and resented his presence in his preserves, with his unlawful nets and snares in manuscript rhyme, as men who hold preserves naturally do resent the presence of poachers.

For the first time since that famous day at the mill his jealous temper got the better of his discretion, and he showed the anger that he felt. He was offended, cool, abrupt, and generally disagreeable. He spoke with ill-concealed bitterness to Graziella; to Venetia he scarcely spoke at all; and to Colonel Camperdown his manner suggested pistols and seconds, were pistols and seconds things of modern English usage. Graziella, who did not care for Harold Camperdown at all, save as a spur in the side of Ernest, had no desire whatsoever to be implicated in his misdeeds, to the loss of her shifty adorer's delightful homage; and Venetia, loving, tender-hearted Venetia, was by turns distressed that the one should have been annoyed and the other affronted.

But Colonel Camperdown, himself the cause of all his hidden turmoil and secret vexation, is provokingly cool and indifferent. The suggested association of pistols and seconds fell harmless on him; the abrupt and decidedly in-

solent manner of the offended hero troubled him no more than the angry chips of a hedge-sparrow or the barking of a toy terrier. His own manner, indeed, was to the full as annoying as Ernest's and his airs of manly superiority put on, it must be said, for the express purpose of offense, made the young fellow fume and rage; and all the more as there was, in effect, a kind of duel which they were fighting out in the presence of the girls—with the colonel in the better place, and himself at a disadvantage.

"You like poetry, I think, Mr. Pierrepont?" at last said Harold, the "Mr." slightly accentuated.

"As a man of some education, I suppose I do," answered Ernest, with a short laugh.

"This a volume of unpublished poems, written by a friend of mine," said the colonel, flirting the leaves of the book between his fingers.

"Written by a friend of yours?" put in Venetia, as diversion. He had not spoken of their authorship before.

"Yes," he answered; "by a man in my regiment—Frank Craven," raising his eyes suddenly to Ernest's face, and speaking in a rather loud and very distinct voice. "The brother of that poor sister of his, Amy, who died less than two years ago. I think you knew her, Mr. Pierrepont?"

"Slightly," said Ernest, with a visible effort.

Colonel Camperdown laughed—a laugh as short and hard and unpleasant as Ernest's had been.

"Adverbs are useful parts of speech," he said, satirically, "but sometimes more useful than exact."

He looked at Venetia while he spoke, and met her eyes raised with grave rebuke to his. She thought him cruel and unjust, and longed to say aloud what she thought—to throw the shield of her loving faith around the man whose peace he was so rudely assailing—to tell him to his face that he was mistaken, had been deceived, and that Ernest Pierrepont, full of noble thoughts and elevated sentiments, loving art and poetry and nature and humanity, had never committed a baseness—was as incapable, indeed, of committing one as was Harold Camperdown himself. And for all his enmity to the man whom she loved, Venetia gave him credit for honesty and rectitude.

Ernest's eyes, roving and unquiet, caught the look that passed between Colonel Camperdown and Venetia—the man who tormented and the woman who adored him. Not having the key, he read the riddle wrong. It seemed to him more a mutual understanding than assertion determined to justify itself on the one side, and disbelief answering back with deprecation on the other. And the result of this false reading on him was to make him resolve to be more lover-like to Venetia than he had been of late, determined as he was to hold her against all comers until he himself should decide on giving her her liberty—that liberty which she would then feel to be desolation and desertion.

"Who was Amy Craven?" asked Graziella, innocently, and of no one in particular, but in a sufficiently loud voice to arrest Ernest's attention, for all that he had turned to Venetia and had begun by a discourse with her on the beauty of trust and the shameful sin of doubt in those who loved and were beloved—trust to the death—trust in spite of all appearances.

"Ask Mr. Pierrepont," said Colonel Camperdown, in a loud voice; adding, with a sudden flash, "remembering only that her brother is an intimate friend of mine, and that it may be my duty to report what is said."

"I have no wish to say anything," said Ernest, holding his head high. "There are times—and reasons—when a man feels himself bound to be silent on all relating to a woman."

"I agree with you," the colonel answered. "As, for instance, when the man has behaved like a scoundrel."

"Exactly," said Ernest, with admirable indifference; "when he has, as you say, behaved like a scoundrel. "Or" (playing with his watch-guard) "when the family has angled for a *bon parti*, and he has seen through their schemes, and drawn off in time."

"And the girl comes off the worst in either case," said Graziella, with sweet compassion. "Like this poor Amy Craven?" turning to Colonel Camperdown.

"Yes, like this poor Amy Craven: killed by a modern Adonis," he answered, bitterly, fixing Ernest with his eyes.

"'Adonis' might say sacrificed through the shameless haste of her friends," retorted Ernest—"friends who wished to press and hurry, and were not content to wait until things had cleared themselves, and liking had ripened into love—friends who showed their mercenary designs too clearly, and so spoilt their own market by their greed."

"You are prepared to defend that view of the case to Captain Craven when he comes home this autumn?" Harold asked, with an unmistakable sneer.

"To a dozen Captain Cravens," returned Ernest. "You may write and tell him so."

Then lowering his voice, he went on with his conversation with Venetia; and Graziella, in revenge, flirted with the colonel to the bounds of indiscretion for the rest of their joint stay.

What had not been done with Venetia had been done surely enough with Graziella—that is, she understood how things had been, and the truth of Mr. Pierrepont's relations with poor Amy. The Creole read the whole story as clearly as if it had been transacted in her sight. Reading it, she determined that this kind of thing should never happen to her; and that the present indecision must be brought to an end. It should be one or other of the two now in the balance; and that soon and without subterfuge. She would not be made now first and now second; to-day queen, to-morrow subordinate, at the will and whim of any man. Mr. Pierrepont must make up his mind which it was to be; and now, at once. This story of the girl, "killed by Adonis," as Colonel Camperdown had said so emphatically, proved to her more than ever the kind of man Ernest was; and though she was in no sense revolted by the knowledge, yet she was, as it were, put on her mettle by the fact that no one had hitherto been able to secure him. That he had jilted others, and was playing fast and loose with Venetia as well as with herself, made her merely resolute to prove herself stronger than all the rest; and that where he had done as he liked with others, he should be mastered and enchained by her.

Wherefore she took her resolution and decided on her measures, and gave Mr. Ernest Pierrepont clearly to understand, during the latter part of his visit, that she was intensely disgusted with him—horribly indignant—and that he would win no more smiles or sweet looks from her until—what?

This kind of dumb warfare lasted for some days, and with other things made Ernest's life just now one of more pain than pleasure. The Creole's coldness distracted him as much as her former delicate allurements had charmed; and when Colonel Camperdown came about her and Venetia, seeming to travesty his own indecision and double attraction, he was nearly beside himself with jealousy—now on account of the one whom he loved, now on account of the one who loved him. Yet, for all this, he could not make up his mind to take the final and irrevocable plunge. Graziella secured, Venetia was lost; and to a vain man, as he was, this was a fact by no means to be desired. Still, something must be done. For these last three days Graziella had scarcely spoken to him, but had seemed to devote herself to Harold Camperdown with maddening amiability; and Charley Mossman, whose hopes had suddenly revived, with respect to Venetia, was, like a faithful dog with something to guard, never far from her side.

Of a surety something must be done, thought Ernest, part rueful, part savage; but what? One must be chosen; but which? Venetia had money, position, and staying power, but Graziella was most to his taste. Venetia had a love that would last for his life; Graziella a passion that,

if it lasted only for a month, would make that month better than fifty years of any other joy.

So he sat and smoked and pondered; and while he pondered, big, good-natured Charley Mossman came in with something of tremendous importance on that good mind of his, and which he wanted to get off it as soon as possible.

There was to be a small dance at Oak-tree House to-morrow evening; one of those country-house impromptu evenings which are the pleasantest things in the world, and more delighted in by young people than more formal gatherings. Poor old Charley, who had no more real knowledge of how to win a woman's love than he had of the signs which tell when it is won and when it is hopeless, had determined to have it out, first with Ernest and then with Venetia. Double-dealing in such matters was by no means in his line, and he wanted to get a clear view of how things stood, and what was his true horizon.

"Look here, old fellow," he said, a little abruptly, when he had filled his favorite pipe and settled himself to serious business, both of talk and smoke—"look here; I have not interfered with you while I thought you loved her and she you; but lately I've lost the track somehow, and I think that you have too. Neither I nor any one else can make out which of the two you are after, if, indeed, you are after either; and it's hard lines on those of us who love one or other, and feel ourselves cut out—shut out, I ought rather to say—by a kind of dog-in-the-manger affair which won't take for itself, and won't let others take for themselves. So now I give you fair warning."

Ernest laughed lightly.

"Well, Charley, old man, I never did think you an orator," he said, with perfect pleasantness; "but I did think you could do something better than this bit of tangle, which it would take *Œdipus* himself to unravel. In plain English, and little of it, what do you mean?"

"Miss Greville—" said Charley, with a pleasantness not quite so perfect as his friend's.

"Yes?—and after?"

"I love her, and I will ask her to be my wife."

"Good! But why say this to me? I am not Miss Greville's father nor guardian."

Charley looked at him with his clear, honest blue eyes a little sadly.

"That's hardly straight, Ernest," he said. "You know as well as I do that you have been philandering round her ever since you came; and you know, too, as well as I do, that when I thought you were in earnest and that she was too, I held off. But now, when you seem to be as much taken up with the other—Miss Despues, I mean—a fellow feels free to cut in if he can."

"All right!" said Ernest, cheerfully, blowing his cigar smoke into concentric rings. "Win her if you can. The best to win always."

"And it is all the same to you?" asked Charley.

"Who makes love to Miss Greville?—all the same," said Ernest, with a short laugh; "you or any other—win her if you can."

"Does that mean that no one can, Ernest? Are you so safe as that?" asked Charley.

"It means just what interpretation you choose to put on it," was the reply. "It means either that I am safe, and so defy you all, or that I have no pretensions in that quarter, and so leave the ground free to you all. It means any thing or nothing, just as you please; the sequel alone shall enlighten you," laughing again with a certain metallic hardness in the ring of his voice that did not sound much like pleasure and light-heartedness.

"I should have thought you would have treated me fairer than this," said Charley, turning away his head.

He did not like to think ill of Pylades, but this kind of thing was not quite his idea of manly fairness. He was conscious in his own heart of having been very fair indeed toward Ernest, absurdly so, perhaps; and it hurt him to be met with this want of candor in return. Also it seemed

somehow an ill turn done to Venetia, and that was worse than want of fairness to himself.

Nothing more, however, could be got out of Ernest; and after talking with great volubility on a dozen and one subjects that had not the slightest interest for either of them, the young squire took his leave, and Ernest went on with his cigar and his meditations, perfectly satisfied that Charley Mossman had not the ghost of a chance with Venetia Greville so long as he chose to keep her to himself. He wished that he could have been as sure about Graziella and the colonel; but her Creole's nature was different altogether from her friend's, and pique might lead her to do what neither jealousy nor heart-break could win from the other.

Whatsoever the end might be, he knew as well as others that it was drawing near that end, and that things would not go on much longer as they were now. To-morrow! Would to-morrow be the fatal Ides of March? Something was in the air that seemed to foretell a crisis, just as something in the air foretells a storm; and more than one looked to the Oak-tree House dance as to the Rubicon which must be passed now or never. Charley Mossman had made up his mind that he would ask Venetia once for all if she thought that in the far distant future, and after infinite pains and love on his part, she would learn to look upon him with affection—the poor fellow's demands were fearfully modest!

Graziella had made up hers that Mr. Pierrepont should make up his; and Venetia, whose spirits had risen to the highest point of happiness during these last few days, when the cobweb veil seemed to have got suddenly cleared away, and Ernest, repelled by Graziella, had been her own once more, thought that surely now her doubts and perplexities would be at an end, and that Ernest would tell her in unmistakable terms what he had already told her in vaguer if more delicious ways—that he loved her—loved her once and forever—and had chosen her before the world as his wife.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DIE CAST.

THE two girls had never looked more beautiful, each in their own way, than they did to-night at the Oak-tree House "little dance." Perhaps Venetia carried off the palm in the opinion of most, hers being that kind of beauty which speaks as much to the heart as to the eye, while Graziella was of the sort that touches the senses and warms the imagination more than it stirs the finer emotions. It was so much loveliness of the flesh, exquisite enough, if you will; but that thing which goes by the name of Soul was somehow left out of the catalogue.

Still, people are not too severe on that thing which goes by the name of Soul—or rather on the want of it—when the subject is a lovely little girl with such a face and figure as Graziella's; and, after all, extreme youth supplies something that makes a very good imitation of spirituality, and that disposes men to be charitable. Nevertheless, in spite of the Creole's surpassing loveliness, it was evidently Venetia's hour of triumph; for every one seemed fascinated to-night by the young heiress and mistress of the house—she who, until Graziella's coming, had been without a rival near her throne.

Charley Mossman, with his clumsy resolution to try a fall with fortune before he had made sure of his footing—to reap his harvest before he had even sown the grain—hung about her like the faithful dog which was his type; all the old aspirants who had presented their petitions and been dismissed seemed to think that renewed signatures might bring reversed readings, and that they had still the traditional hope which clings to life; and Colonel Camperdown, as well as the rest, formed part of her body-guard, and looked as if he too had ideas like the rest. All of which piqued Ernest Pierrepont still more into the semblance of his first devotion, and made him feel that none

of them should take from him the prize that he had won; and that he would show them all how easily he could distance the best among them when he chose to exert his power.

"What have you done to yourself to-night?" he said, in an under-tone, to Venetia, as he carried her off on his arm. "I have never seen you look so lovely—so divinely fair as you do. What is it?"

Venetia raised her eyes with a happy smile that soon passed into a still happier bashfulness.

"I have done nothing to myself," she said, prettily; but her voice and face added to her words. "It is only my love for you, and yours for me, that have glorified me."

"I wish it had been something that you knew how and why," said Ernest, still speaking below his breath, "then I might make sure of having you always as you are to-night."

"I feel well—and happy; that is all," faltered Venetia, shyly.

He pressed her to him lightly.

"You are happy because you are an angel," he said.

"No," said Venetia; "because my friends are good to me."

"And I am one of them?" he whispered.

"Yes," she said, also in a whisper.

"And always shall be?"

"If you wish it—always," she said.

"Would any one relinquish you who had once held you?" returned Ernest. "Ask yourself, is there a friend you have who would care to let you go, when once you had laid your dear hand in his, and given him the privilege of—caring for you?"

"I hope some would not," she faltered.

"None," was his reply, again lightly pressing her to his breast; and then the waltz began, and Venetia in her fairest moment of happiness and love felt how good a thing it was to live.

Now she felt sure that she was beloved, and that she would soon be engaged in the face of the world. Ernest was too noble to trifle with a woman's honest affection which he had taken pains to win. And he knew that her affection was honest, and given only because distinctly, if covertly, sought. Yes, it was all right now, poor Venetia thought, as the dance ended, she looked round the room while her big blue happy eyes, and saw Ernest bending down to Graziella, speaking to her as if with entreaty, while Colonel Camperdown stood at a little distance pulling his mustache, and looking as if waiting his turn to offer adulation.

Meanwhile Charley Mossman came tumultuously to where Venetia was standing, and carried her off on his arm, as Ernest had done less than half an hour ago; and before the dance was over had asked her to be his wife with no more idea of tact or management than if he had been asking her to give him a rose or to sell him a pony.

When Venetia heard him plead, she shrank back with the same feeling of desecration that she would have if she had been married. It was something so infinitely shocking to her that Ernest's friend should ask for the love of Ernest's—engaged wife. Had Colonel Camperdown, for instance, or any one else not so intimately bound up with Mr. Pierrepont, come to her knees and begged for her grace, she would have been more pitiful, less revolted; but in the injustice of her own purity, her own certainty, she was hard on Charley, and answered him with so much passion of negation that he saw something more than mere refusal stirred her.

"Tell me only one thing, Miss Greville," he said, pitifully, looking at her with his honest face full of pain, "are you engaged to Ernest?"

"Yes—or almost," said Venetia, severely; and then relenting, she added, "I thought you knew."

"No, I did not," he answered.

"No? Then I am sorry I spoke so harshly," she said, tenderly apologetic.

Hardness was so foreign to her, it pained her so much to be forced by sterner virtue into its use, that it was a relief to her heart to apologize. What she had done by conscience she shrank from by nature; and she was so glad that now nature and conscience might be once more in accord.

"I am glad if you are happy," said the poor fellow, ruefully. "I am not one of those, Miss Greville, that envy another man because he has been more fortunate than myself. Ernest is a fine old fellow, and will make you happy; but I wish he had been franker with me."

"Thank you," said Venetia, with glowing face, ignoring the last part of his remark. "And you will forget this little mistake and be, as you have always been, our best friend—our brother?"

"Yes," said Charley, gallantly suppressing himself.

He pressed her hand in a frank, sisterly way.

"Thank you," she said again, prettily. "And I too will forget this evening, and we will both go on as if it had never been."

"You are an angel," said the young man, gulping down something in his throat that was half choking him; and then they went on with the dance as if nothing had happened, and the fortunes of a life had not been cast and decided on the die of the moment.

Seated in a corner Graziella watched the circumstances of the evening, and made her comments, and took her measures accordingly. She saw, with eyes that burned like fire, the homage of which her friend was the center; and she said to herself that she would have her revenge somehow, and prove where the larger power of attraction lay. She saw Charley Mossman's fair English face beam and brighten with excitement as he edged his way through the little throng, and wrote his name on Venetia's card for the first dance disengaged; she saw Harold Camperdown, cool, calm, but with an odd look of waiting in his face, write his three times over; and then Ernest, a little flushed and with that air which seemed to join the entreaty of a slave with the command of a master, broke through them all, and taking Venetia's hand, led her away as his by right. And seeing all this, she took her decision, and determined on what she would and would not do.

What she would do was to make Colonel Camperdown in love with her if she chose; what she would not do was to accord the faintest grace to Ernest Pierrepont, until he had decided which. If Venetia was blind to the fact that he was playing fast and loose with them, she was not; nor was she inclined to let the game go on. One or the other, whichever he chose; but it should be one or the other, else no more smiles, no more grace, from her.

Graziella was not the girl, young as she was, to go back on her intentions. Once made, she held to them pretty firmly; and when Ernest came to her, after he had made things as he considered straight with Venetia, and begged her for the honor of a dance, he was met by a refusal—and a refusal that meant every thing.

"I am engaged," said Graziella, dropping her eyes; not with that tender bashfulness which can not raise them to the beloved face—that fond and failing look which is so delightful to the man who loves—but coldly, scornfully, as if he were beneath her regard and she too much preoccupied or too much disgusted to care to hold any terms with him.

"Which, then, may I have?" asked Ernest in his sweetest tones.

"None; I am engaged for all," said Graziella, opening and shutting her fan while looking at Colonel Camperdown, standing a little apart, pulling his mustache, watching and waiting.

"For all?" incredulously.

"Yes, for all," said the Creole, raising her heavy lids and looking at him for one single instant with a flash of superb scorn and pride.

"I am unfortunate," said Mr. Pierrepont, with as much coldness as her own.

She smiled, but did not speak. It was a disagreeable

smile, and meant to convey the assurance that if Ernest felt himself unfortunate, she did not hold herself to be pitied. If it was a misfortune to him that she could not dance with him, it was none to her. His substitutes were quite as much to her liking, and perhaps more so.

All of which Ernest understood as clearly as if her thoughts had been put into words instead of looks. He was too well versed in that kind of language not to be able to read it accurately; and Graziella knew as well as he what he thought and what he divined. There was no chance of propitiation at this moment; and, besides, a waltz was beginning—the waltz which poor Charley took as the spring-board for his wild leap in the dark—when Colonel Camperdown came up to Graziella, and bore her off before the eyes of Ernest Pierrepont, as it seemed to him, with insolent triumph and security.

All through the evening this dumb quarrel between Graziella and Ernest raged with unabated bitterness. She would not speak to him nor dance with him; while she kept Harold Camperdown chained to her side, till the dowagers looked from one to the other, and wagged their heads in wrath at the sight of such early and pronounced depravity. After the little comedy had continued for nearly the whole evening—Ernest paying the most marked attention to Venetia, Colonel Camperdown to Graziella—Ernest suddenly gave way. What Charley Mossman's expressed intentions had aroused on the one side, so did the colonel's apparent designs on the other; and after a moment's hesitation, the final step was taken. Ernest went into the conservatory, and there, tearing a leaf out of his pocket-book, wrote a few lines in pencil rapidly.

He looked flurried and disturbed enough while he wrote; but when he came back to the room he had the air of a man who has once more taken possession of events.

A quadrille was forming. It was one of the dances for which he had engaged Venetia. He went up to her lover-like, smiling; and she received him with a face as eloquent of happiness as of love. She was blessed, supremely blessed, to-night. All the clouds were swept away, and she had only sunshine and joy, as of old. He offered his arm, and they took their places, and found themselves *vis-a-vis* with Graziella and Harold.

A sudden light came into Ernest's face, and he looked strangely resolute, yet not ungentle. At the first meeting of their hands in the chain, Graziella let only the tips of her fingers pass lightly over his sleeves; but the next time he took her hand wholly in his; and when he left it, he had slipped into it a folded bit of paper. Then he went back to Venetia, and pressed her hand tenderly, and looked into her happy eyes lovingly. He was very glad that he had done this thing to Graziella; so glad, that it made him love Venetia all the more.

Then the evening came to an end, and the guests dispersed, after having made up a water party for to-morrow, in the moonlight.

When she had got rid of Venetia, who seemed, to her impatience, as if she would never go to-night, Graziella drew the crumpled bit of paper from her bosom where she had hidden it, and read, written in an agitated hand, these words:

"My darling, why do you frown on me? Light of my life, do you not know that I cannot live without your smiles? Take pity on the poor wretch who is at your feet—your slave and your lover; and do not trample on the heart that is in your power."

Graziella smiled.

"Yes, very pretty," she said to herself. "But all this is only what he has said to Venetia, and perhaps to a dozen others, twenty times over. If he wants me to love him, he must say so in plain words, and engage himself to me. I will not be caught by any man in the world who holds himself free and me only captive—like that silly Venetia; nor allow a man who does not commit himself to say anything to keep off others who might make one an offer—like Colonel Camperdown, for instance. I will make Mr.

Ernest choose between us—Venetia and me—and then I will think of what to say to him. Dear, handsome, good-for-nothing fellow, it will be 'Yes,' I know—for a little while!"

She said this just as Venetia laid her head on her pillow, a happy smile making her fair face like an angel's in its pure pleasure and loving content; saying in turn:

"Ah, he does love me, I am sure of it. There is some reason why he has not said so yet, but he will now. I am certain that he loves me, and that he will ask me to be his wife before long. He has made me feel too surely that I am loved not to let others know it too. He is too good and honorable to deceive, and that story of Amy Craven is not true. Colonel Camperdown is cruel. Ernest never deceived any woman!"

The next evening was an ideal; warm, fresh, and fragrant. The sun was within an hour of setting when they all met at the river-side; and when set, then the ruddy harvest moon would light up the old earth, almost like another sun. They were to row down the river as far as St. Herbert's Isle, a little island with the Hermitage, a ruined stone building whereof tradition made a holy retreat for some old-time saint, and modern manners an eating-place for parties of pleasure—a whitewashed palimpsest for multitudinous writers of doggerel verse and undesignated initials, a resort for lovers—and a reason why for such an expedition as this.

The present party was composed of the usual members—the triad; Charley Mossman, who determined not to be downhearted because he had been unsuccessful, and to keep his own counsel about that little talk during the waltz last evening; Colonel Camperdown and his half-sister, Emily, with a married sister of his own and her husband—a Mr. and Mrs. Judge—to avert the wrath and secure the countenance of Mrs. Grundy. They had a long, narrow, four-oared river boat, and each gentleman took an oar, which prevented "spooning," and did not allow of even much eye-flirtation, seeing that the looks meant for one might be misinterpreted by another, and would certainly be seen by all. No; there was no special flirting during the row. The girls sang glees and part songs; and the men, resting on their oars, put in bass or tenor, as nature had endowed them.

Graziella was half lying on a kind of divan made of the softest cushions and three parts of the shawls, looking divinely lovely, Ernest thought, as every now and then she stole an occasional languid look at his handsome face through the fringe of her dark lashes—a look that seemed to promise as well as to prepare him for the better things to come.

Emily Backhouse trailed her fingers through the water and caught the water lilies as they floated by; Mrs. Judge, a cheery, bright-eyed little woman with a couple of babies and not an ounce of sentiment, made conversation for a dozen; and Venetia at the stern—fair, sweet, placid, and blessed—steered with rare technical skill.

So they went merrily down the stream, to all appearance the happiest and most careless-hearted boat-load to be found in all England. At last they came to St. Herbert's Isle, and shot the boat alongside the broken little pier that served as a landing-place. The men made it fast to the posts, and the girls stepped ashore, just as the moon arose above the horizon, and began to carve the world beneath in silver and ebony.

At first they were all in a loosely amalgamated body together. Those who wished to choose their companions were afraid to be precipitate, and waited for the pairing to appear a matter of accident rather than of design; and those who had no such desire kept with the rest and unintentionally prevented disintegration.

But presently, partly because the path grew narrow, and partly because the natural impatience of man made uncertainty and a longer delay unpleasant, the loosely amalgamated body separated into pairs; and Ernest found himself

by the side of Graziella, while Harold Camperdown took military possession of Venetia.

Unselfish and unsuspecting though she was, Venetia could not help feeling one acute pang of disappointment as her lover, or rather the man whom she loved, passed away into the shadow of the woods side by side with her friend. "The influences of soul and sense," had thrilled her to-night as they long ago had thrilled guileless Genevieve; and her imagination had pictured all sorts of beautiful eventualities for herself. But Ernest, engaged in an animated conversation which apparently engrossed him, wandered into a by-path with Graziella; and the last words that Venetia heard were, "art—poetry—music—rapture."

Then she felt the blood leave her face, and a sickness such as she had never known before gather round her heart. Life, the solid earth, her friends, her love, all seemed to fail her; but she shook herself clear of her weakness, and turned to speak to her companion. She met his eyes fixed on her with a look full of acute tenderness and compassion, so that involuntarily her own filled up with tears. It seemed to her as if he had spoken and said, "Poor child!" nothing, however, was said; and Venetia, loyally anxious that Ernest should not be condemned, put pressure on herself, and talked with a forced calmness, a false brightness, that imposed only on herself. For him it was always in his heart, "Poor child—poor child—she feels that she is deceived, and knows that she has to suffer!"

Venetia and Harold Camperdown had taken a way that led around the island as a belt, not one of the radii converging on the Hermitage. It was the same path as that taken by Ernest and Graziella, they having turned to the right—these others to the left. And thus it was that after some time they came to a cleared space, where, seated on a fallen tree, they saw in the bright moonlight Ernest Pierrepont and Graziella Despues—he with his arm around her waist, she with her head resting on his shoulder—while they heard him say.

"My darling! my life! I love you! Sweetest Graziella, I have never loved before now!"

"And I love you," said Graziella's flute-like voice, exquisitely subdued.

Then their faces met; and Graziella received her first kiss of love from the man on whose loyalty her dearest friend had embarked the happiness of her youth.

"My darling, will you be my wife?" said Ernest with passion.

"Yes—husband," answered Graziella.

Venetia turned to Colonel Camperdown with a wild, scared look. She held out her hands as if asking for help; then, with a little cry, fell forward, and was caught by Harold just in time to save her.

"Mr. Pierrepont," he said, in a loud, harsh voice, "go to the Hermitage for my sister, Mrs. Judge. Miss Greville has fainted."

CHAPTER VIII.

WITHOUT FALTERING.

"INDEED, Venny, it was not my fault. It has all come about I cannot tell how; but believe me, dear, it was not my fault."

These were the first words that Graziella spoke when the two girls had returned home, and Venetia had gone as usual into the Creole's room to bid her good-night and see that all was arranged to her satisfaction. And she said them with the most excellent imitation of truth imaginable. One of those perfect make-believes who deceive even themselves, for the moment she did really think, as she said, that it had not been her fault, and that she had not known how it had all come about; certainly not by her own desire, and still less by her own endeavor. It was the temporary blindness of the false, when, frightened at what they have done, they seek to quiet conscience and set themselves straight with those whom they have wronged.

"It was not my fault," she repeated, burying her face in Venetia's lap, and shedding some half-forced, half-nervous tears.

Venetia laid her hand lightly on the pretty head of the girl who had been for two long years her little queen and cherished idol, and whom even now she could not accuse of intentional ill-doing.

"Don't cry, dear," she said, quietly; "I ought to have known that it would have come to this. He could not help loving you, Gracie—who could?"

"But it was very wrong, and he ought not," said Graziella, with pretty vehemence. "If he had not cared for me first, and showed it so much, I never should for him. But, Venny," lifting up her eyes imploringly, "you yourself know how charming he is, and that no woman in the world could possibly resist him if he chose to make himself beloved."

"How can I blame you, then?" said poor Venetia. "It is no more your fault for loving him than it is his for loving you."

"How good you are! how generous!" cried Graziella, with a curious mixture of shame and pretense shame, in that she had acted so unworthily toward one so true and brave, one so much her superior; pretense, in that this kind of unselfishness was a height of morality to which she in her jealous exclusiveness could neither rise nor yet wish to rise; neither understand nor yet wholly respect.

This latter feeling became eventually the strongest, so that, after a moment, she thought to herself, "All the same, Venny could not have cared so very much for him, else she would not have given him up so easily."

"Generous!" said Venetia, hopelessly. "He has taken himself from me and given himself to you. I have only to accept what I cannot help."

"I wish I had not come!" cried Graziella, petulantly. "If it had not been for that horrid scarlet fever, everything would have gone right, Venny, and you would perhaps have been married before the summer was out."

"Don't!" said Venetia, with a sharp cry.

"She covered her face for a moment, then lifted it again, and spoke as quietly as before.

"And which is best," she said; "that he has seen and loved you before instead of after? What would have become of me, Gracie, if it had been after?"

"Oh! a married man!" cried Graziella, with becoming repudiation.

"If I could not keep him now, I should not have kept him then," Venetia answered, wearily; "or I should have kept him against his will, and I would rather he were happy without me than unhappy with me."

"You are an angel," murmured Graziella.

She did not know what else to say. It seemed so strange to her that Venetia should be sitting there with her hand in hers, her voice as gentle, her pale face as kind as ever, when she knew in her own heart that she had plotted against her happiness and stolen her lover from her by intentional wiles and charms displayed for the purpose.

If such a thing had happened to her, Graziella, she felt that she would have killed the woman who had supplanted her; she would have sprung at her throat and strangled her, not have sat there holding her hand, caressing her head, and speaking in quiet, gentle tones, more sorrowful than angry—indeed, not angry at all. And that Venetia should take her heart-break so patiently seemed to her the most wonderful part of all the strange little drama of love and infidelity, of faith and treachery, that had been playing of late.

She was glad, however, that all had been got over so well. She thought Venetia very silly to be so fond of her, very mean-spirited to let her lover go so easily; but it was a comfort not to have had a scene. And when the first interview between them both and Ernest had been gone through, and she had been formally recognized as his deliberate choice and her friend's successful rival, then there would be nothing to fear, and things would go smoothly.

So she reasoned in the tangled jungle of thoughts and motives which made up her mind, and her reasoning justified her action throughout.

It is not always that the largest amount of womanly strength lies with those who make the greatest display. Those muscular creatures with swinging step and resonant voice who look fit to lead an army, are sometimes as soft as wax when touched by mental sorrows and difficulties, while essentially womanly women have a reserve force which carries them bravely through the darkest hours.

As now with Venetia. Her strength was in her unselfishness and her love. She was one of those who love beyond self; whose first thought is for others, whose main desire is the happiness of the beloved. But though she was too unselfish to grieve in the headlong way of women who think only of their own misfortunes, and though she was determined to do her best to sympathize with the joy that was built upon her own despair, yet she could neither prevent nor conceal her suffering. She paled and drooped under her sorrow as if her life had been suddenly weakened; and when she came down stairs the next morning she looked like one who has just come out of a deadly illness. Still, she held on her way without faltering. She loved both Ernest and Graziella better than herself; and she had besides that pride of reticence which belongs to the gentler kind of women, and which makes them forbear to complain under suffering.

Nothing in her manner could have told the keenest observer that she had cause against Graziella, when the two girls met over the breakfast table, and exchanged kisses and sweet greetings as usual. Only her face was deadly white, even to her lips; her blue eyes were purpled and heavy, swollen and sad; and instead of the graceful but elastic curves which had been one of her distinguishing charms, her figure seemed shrunk and as if bent under a heavy weight. Even Aunt Honora could not fail to see the change which twelve hours had worked in her niece, and cried out in a tone of personal injury:

"Good gracious, child! what on earth is the matter with you this morning? What have you been doing to yourself? Your complexion is horrid, and you look anyhow!"

"Yes, Venny dear, you look as if you had a bad headache," said Graziella, tenderly.

"I have," Venetia answered, without affectation; and headache, too, she might have added.

"Then do, for goodness' sake, child, get something to take it away," said Aunt Honora; "some red lavender or something. It is quite dreadful to see you look such an object."

"I shall be better after breakfast, auntie," said Venetia, in the same quiet, simple, uninterested way as before, as if she had been speaking of something that did not concern herself at all.

"Then get your breakfast," said Aunt Honora, peevishly. "I can not bear to see you look so washed out and dreadful."

Breakfast, though useful enough as a reviver in some cases, can not do much for a girl whose lover has proved faithless and her best friend treacherous; and when Venetia had finished her tea and toast she was just as white and broken as before. But as she did not cry, Graziella was not so very much disturbed; and as she insisted that nothing was really amiss with her, Aunt Honora subsided into silence. So she was left to herself, which was what she wanted.

Thus the early morning hours passed—Venetia apparently reading the crabbed bit of Jean Paul which she took as her soul's comfort, but forgetting to turn the pages and not seeing the words; while Graziella, with a show of doing modern point, alternately watched her friend and wondered what she was thinking of, or looked at her watch and wished that Ernest would come, both to get it over and rescue her from this appalling dullness. And, sure enough, exactly at twelve o'clock Ernest arrived to-day just the

same as on any other day. He, too, wanted to get it over. If he could he would willingly have avoided the ordeal altogether; but we all have to face the consequences of our own acts, and the fate which we ourselves fashion is our Frankenstein and our master.

It was a bad quarter of an hour for the young man, nearly as bad as that when Amy's mother brought him her poor daughter's last letter, the letter written two days before her death, when she sent him back the lock of hair which he had given her; the rose which he had kissed and put into her hand, whispering, "My soul is with you now;" the little amaranth which he had also kissed and given her, saying, "An emblem of my love"—sending back all these cherished treasures of her fatal hope, and with them "the love which she carried with her to the grave," and the pardon that she breathed beyond it. But the bad quarters must be lived through all the same as the good ones, and Ernest had to live through his.

As he came into the room, nerved to meet his accusing angel, his face made up to a mask of false innocence and ignorance of evil alike, he found only his enchantress; and the reprieve came upon him with almost as great a sense of relief as if he had been going to suffer torture and was suddenly respited. Was it lingering tenderness or conscience which made Ernest say rapidly, after his first embrace, "How does she take it?"

Graziella, keen and jealous, understood it as the first, if, wise and crafty, she did not choose to show what she thought. A shade came over her face—subtle, undefinable—but, all the same, a shade. She took her hands from Ernest's arm, where she had clasped them in a pretty abandonment of loving pleasure, and said, with a forced laugh:

"Admirably! Your Venetia is not of the kind to break her heart for you or any one else. Girls with milk and water in their veins never do."

"I am glad she takes it so quietly," Ernest answered, with as much mortification as relief. "Though I never gave her any real cause—never did more than pay her the ordinary attentions which all men pay to pretty girls before they have seen *the one*—lovingly, yet with an air of helpless virtue unjustly assailed—"I was afraid that the poor little thing was fond of me."

"So was I," said Graziella. "But, you see, we need not have frightened ourselves. She was no fonder of you than you were of her," suddenly lifting her eyes and looking full at the young man kneeling by her side—his favorite attitude of worship.

"I have never been really fond of any one before you, my beautiful child-queen, my pearl of the Antilles!" cried Ernest, enthusiastically. "All the rest was only the prologue, the preface, the shadow. This is the real thing, and this only!"

"I am afraid, however, that your shadows were very like the substance," said Graziella, prettily; and Ernest, kissing her hands, answered quickly:

"I have never loved before now. Will you not believe me—do you not believe me, my darling?"

"It is too pleasant not to believe," said Graziella, laying her cheeks on his forehead while she clasped her hands again on his arm, when the litany of lovers' prayers and praises began again, and time lost itself in the old, old follies that never weary and never change.

If Ernest and Graziella both felt that it "had to be got over," so did Venetia. She knew that she had committed the most fatal mistake possible to a woman—let her lover see his power before he has established his right—given frank possession before formal demand.

And now she had to hark back on her mistake and do that most difficult thing of all—meet as a mere friend pledged to another the man who knew that she loved him, and not to let her love be seen—the man who had been her lover in the silent confessions between them, when all had been understood and nothing spoken. Yes, he had been her lover. Unsaid though it was, the truth between them

was indestructible if to the world she had no "case." For though he had made love to her he had not made her an offer; and, until the final self-committing word is said, no woman should suffer her soul to stray. It had all been vague, unpunctuated, but understood; and it was this very vagueness of form, coupled with that terrible clearness of understanding, which made the present moment so difficult.

But it had to be done; and when the luncheon bell rang Venetia came down from her room to face her ordeal, and greet as the acknowledged lover of her dearest friend the man who up to nine o'clock last evening had been her own.

Just as she was crossing the hall, Colonel Camperdown rode up to the door, which stood open. With an indescribable feeling of support, as if she were now under the guardianship of a brother, she went up to him quickly, and held out her hands eagerly.

"I am so glad you have come!" she cried, with a girlish kind of fervor.

For the first time since last night her eyes filled with tears. He was her friend, the only person who really understood her; the one who had been with her in the moment of her supreme anguish; the one from whom she had no secrets—poor, honest, clumsy Charley not counting. But his presence unnerved her even to tears; for many a loving soul, strong enough when alone in its anguish, breaks down into the weakness of self-pity in the presence of a sympathizer.

"Have you recovered from your fatigue, Miss Greville?" asked Harold, quite in a natural, matter-of-fact tone; but his eyes were not as quiet as his voice.

"Yes; thanks. I am better—quite well," said Venetia, scarcely knowing what she did say, but repeating again, "I am so glad you have come!" After a moment she gathered her thoughts together so far as to add, "You will stay to luncheon, will you not?"

He took in the whole situation.

"Yes," he answered, "I will stay if you ask me."

"Of course I do—of course!" was her eager reply.

And the servant, standing there, made his own comments, which were not friendly to his young mistress, and wondered if, after all, good as she looked, his young lady was no better than some others, and would be a fly-by-night all the same as those others—one down and another come on—if she had her head.

His thoughts, however, were nothing to the action of the present moment, which was that Venetia and Colonel Camperdown should go into the drawing-room, where Ernest and Graziella were sitting on the sofa in the unmistakable attitude of engaged lovers, and not show—he, his disgust; she, her despair—but should greet these two traitors with the hypocritical decorum exacted by good breeding from wrath and sorrow alike.

"I hope that you have recovered from your indisposition, Miss Greville," said Ernest, affectedly.

For all the *savoir-faire* belonging to him by right as a man of the world greatly experienced, he felt himself horribly out of place, and as diffident as a school-boy. The presence of Colonel Camperdown made it all so much more awkward, he thought to himself peevishly. But he acted well, and thoughts are not always visible on the face.

Venetia trembled. It was *his* voice that she heard; *his* eyes that were looking into hers—hers, which until now had always met his with such glad and loving confidence; *his* hand in which her own lay clasped. It was the man whom she had placed as a god in the temple of her heart, and who, still dreaming as she was, not yet awake to his true nature, was even now her god—with face averted. Her life was all in ruins; but he himself, the beautiful and divine destroyer, was the same as ever, and showing no change, no difference, save in his attitude to her.

It was only she who had suffered; his fascination and Graziella's charm remained as before. How vague and un-

real it was! Was this really life, or was it a dream of the night that looked like day and truth?

"You are better now, Venetia, are you not?" said Graziella, in her sweet, caressing voice, watching her with those burning eyes which so strangely belied the soft voice, the gentle manner.

"Yes," said Venetia, with an effort. Then, at a long interval, followed, "Thank you," as if it had been an independent sentence, and said in a voice that was not her own.

"I am glad of that," said Ernest, with admirable compassionateness and sweet, seductive sympathy.

Venetia turned to the window to hide the sharp and sudden pain which made her wince; and Colonel Camperdown, looking at her, comforted his soul, so far as he could, by a manner to Ernest that bordered on insult. Horsewhipping is ruffianly, dueling out of date; but how ardently he longed to have his hands on the throat of the man who found his life's noblest ambition satisfied by making a succession of pretty girls in love with him, that he might say to his intimate friends, "Ah, poor little thing, she would have given ten years of her life if I would have married her!"

When, however, the spasm had passed, and Venetia understood what was going on about her, she came back to the group with a face controlled to an almost statuesque calmness, and with the tender craftiness of love spoke to Ernest with a cheerful kind of indifference that cost her more pain than all the rest. But she must not let Colonel Camperdown think that he was to blame. It was she herself; she had been precipitate, unwise, self-deceiving—he had not been false; and her friend, as she had begun to call him—her friend, Harold Camperdown, must understand this at once, and not make her lover bear the weight of an unjust condemnation. She must carry her burden so bravely that none should see where it pressed; accept her part without faltering, so that none should blame her lover or her friend. If she died under the strain of concealment, the world should know nothing; and though the relative position of each to the other was changed, the terms of the Holy Alliance should appear to be as of old.

Grains of gold to be thrown into the eyes that were watching her so eagerly! Would they blind them?

Those grains cast now by the dear, unselfish, loving hands, did not blind Harold Camperdown. He read the girl's heart and meaning, and let her see that he did; for when he shook hands with her and bade her good-by in the garden, he said, in rather a husky voice:

"Miss Greville, I have often heard of angels, but I have never seen one till now. I thank God that I have known you."

"On his side Ernest thought:

"She is pluckier than I gave her credit for. Poor little woman, how desperately she loves me! Nothing but love could make her take it so sweetly. Ah, she is a dear good girl! I do not know a better, but—she was not destined."

Graziella's thoughts went back to the forked road at which they had stood from the beginning.

"How can she take it so quietly? Either she did not love him, or she hopes to win him back by her patience; I must watch and see which."

If rarely, yet it does sometimes come to pass that the innocence of the dove comes to the same thing in the end as the wisdom of the serpent—that unselfishness has the same result as worldly cleverness and astute calculation. Had Venetia been guided by the craftiest old veteran who had ever made wise walking among social plowshares her chief study, she could not have been better counseled than by the purity, the loyalty, of her own heart. She stopped the mouth of gossip. That was the first thing to do; and unwittingly she did it. For who could take the part of one who made it evident to all that she had no part to take, but had cast in, her lot with the rest? How constitute himself a champion when no cause was proclaimed and no

defender summoned? People might say that she looked ill; but what of that?

Girls often look ill, yet others do not make it cause of general quarrel, or think it necessary to take sides as to the reason why. Who could possibly say that it was because of Ernest Pierrepont's engagement to Graziella, when she, Venetia, accepted that engagement so quietly, spoke of it so frankly, expressed her belief in its perfect fitness with so much ease, and when all three were as inseparable and apparently as close friends as before? The world began to think that it had deceived itself, and that there had never been anything warmer than mere friendship between Miss Greville and Mr. Pierrepont. It had been his flirting manner and her ingenious simplicity; but he had not meant and she had not taken. So by reason of that generous protection given to her false friends the talk died out, and her burden, carried without faltering, freed them from theirs.

There were two persons, however, whom her gentle heroism did not mislead—Harold Camperdown and Charley Mossman. Both knew what Ernest had done, and one of the two something of what she had suffered. And both in consequence did their best to make life unpleasant to the young man, and to let him feel that if he had gathered a rose unlawfully, it was one plentifully beset with thorns. For, as Charley said,

"How it has all come about I can not for the life of me make out. But Miss Greville does not tell lies, and she told me distinctly that she was engaged. There is only one way out of it, so far as I can see—my old friend Ernest is a scoundrel!"

To which Colonel Camperdown replied, emphatically, as chorus:

"Thorough!"

CHAPTER IX.

MADE FOR EACH OTHER.

"MADE for each other," as they were, alike in many characteristics, and sympathetic if chiefly in the least admirable of their qualities, Graziella and Ernest for the first days of their engagement led that life of blind happiness which comes in the early time of confessed love. No cloud veiled the glory of their sky, no presage of coming evil shadowed the brilliancy of the present; it was all excitement, intoxication, delight; and even Ernest, in spite of his wide experience, was so much swept away as to think that this was really true at last, and that he had skirted by so many dangerous possibilities to be saved by a good Providence for perfection in the end. "Made for each other;" that was just it; and in face of such pre-arranged fitness where could there have been place for Venetia, and how could he repent?

All the same, if he neither regretted nor felt remorse he had a great deal of brotherly affection for the "poor little thing," as he used to call his former Beatrice when he spoke of her to Graziella.

He was always glad to give her a few nice little words of kindness when he could, out of general sight and hearing, and to make her feel that he regarded her as a sister—but his dearest sister; as a friend—but his most trusted, his best-beloved friend. He tried to slip into the new arrangement as if there had never been any other kind of relationship between them; but if he was clever, Venetia was sincere, and sincerity is generally a difficult quality to manage.

For all her gentleness, all her sweetness, and that kind of tender submissiveness which goes with the best sort of womanly love, Venetia had too much self-respect to let herself be led into doubtful action—too much loyalty to Graziella, who had had none for her, to come within her boundaries. When, by chance, she found herself alone with Ernest, and he began his prose poems on the charms of friendship between men and women, and the exquisite delight which her sweet friendship gave to him, infusing into

his theme the meaning and the manner of love, but love that for some other weightier reason had had to die in its original form and had now risen again in its new character, Venetia used to shrink as if touched by hot iron, and leave the room in a very tempest of grief and doubt, of bewilderment and despair. What did it all mean? Had something miscarried, and might things have been different? Was he, as well as herself, the creature of circumstance rather than the creator of his own fate?

But this feeling by degrees wore off, and she began to see that what he really wanted was to hold her while giving nothing of himself in return, to be engaged to the one and loved by the other. And the greatest pain in all this chapter of pain was in these early glimpses into the hidden truth of things, these partial forebodings that the golden idol of her dreams had feet of coarser clay than belong to most.

The two girls were one day sitting in the garden, when Ernest came as usual. As the accepted lover of Graziella, pending the arrival of the letter from her father in Cuba to annul or to ratify the engagement, he was every day at Oak-tree House; and it was a question whether this frequent intercourse was for the happiness of any of them. Ernest and Graziella themselves were best when under control; and as to Venetia, the slow process of awaking to the true nature of the man whom she had loved with so much sincerity, however salutary, could scarcely be called happiness. But whether to the good or ill of the triad, this frequent intercourse was of the accepted order of things, and had to be endured.

This day, when Ernest came and found the girls in the garden, he found also Colonel Camperdown, where he was often to be met now, sitting quite at home on a stool at Venetia's feet, holding in his hands a skein of silk which she was winding. His face was turned up to her smiling, hers bent down to him also smiling, as she pulled at a knot wish her long fair fingers, and passed the winder in and out the tangled strands. Graziella was looking on yawning. Since her engagement to Mr. Pierrepont the colonel had become to her as if carved out of stone, and she had left off by now trying to make him flesh and blood.

The knowledge that he had lost Venetia, though by his own deliberate choice, and for compensation, and the fear that Harold would profit by his "lapsed legacy," was the bitter drop in Ernest's present cup of sweets. As he came up to the little group, his pale face white and his dark eyes aflame, even Graziella's exquisite beauty and charming coquetry failed to move him. For the moment he felt that he would have given up her and all the world to have Venetia to himself again. But he smiled and talked with admirable propriety, and was careful not to betray himself. It was only that his face was pale and his eyes aflame, and the smile about his mouth pinched and forced.

"Your work is an apt emblem of human life, Miss Greville," he said, after a short pause, during which he had apparently watched the progress of the disentanglement as a puzzle of which the solution interested him—Graziella watching him.

"Yes," said Venetia, gently.

She remembered the time when his vapory disquisitions were utterances of wisdom and beauty combined, and she dreaded the stirring of the depths.

"An emblem of human life," he repeated, with half a sigh. "The smooth running of the silken strands all at once interrupted by some cruel complication which nothing but patience and dexterity, and, let me add, confidence in your ultimate success, can undo."

"Yes," said Venetia again, with a deep blush.

"For my part," put in Graziella, carelessly, "I could never have the patience that Venny has. I would cut the knot at once, not spend the best part of the day in undoing it. When it is undone the silk is spoilt," she added, lifting up her eyes to Ernest's face with an odd kind of look.

"Do you think so?" he said, tenderly.

He wanted her to understand that his affair with Venetia—if indeed that could be called an affair at all which was simply the infatuation of a girl for a young man who has never done more than pay her a few ordinary civilities—had been the knot which had been overcome by her and through her; to Venetia it was this entanglement with Graziella that he secretly counseled her to traverse with patience, dexterity, and hope.

"What do you think, Colonel Camperdown?" asked Graziella, suddenly.

"I?" he answered, with unmistakable disdain. "Nothing. Sentimentalities and mock philosophy have no charm for me, and, thank Heaven, are not in my way."

"A soldier's trade is not one of delicate thought or poetic insight, I know," said Ernest, superbly. "You must forgive me, Camperdown. I forgot the specialty of my audience when I spoke"—with a superior smile.

"A soldier's trade, as you call it," answered Harold, with a look that seemed to measure the younger man from head to foot, and to find him wanting when measured, "is generally one of straightforwardness and truth—of manliness and honor. We leave your delicate thought and poetic insight to the men who have none of these things."

"Yes, a city delivered up to the pillage, villages set in flames, spies and ambushes—these are the proofs of your four virtues," laughed Ernest, as if it was all a good joke that was passing between them. "What were they? truth, honor, manliness—ah, yes, and straightforwardness—straightforwardness!" He laughed again.

"You find the word difficult to pronounce, Mr. Pierrepont?" said Harold, viciously.

"With its present adjuncts? Well, yes," was his answer.

"You are right," flamed Harold. "Its present adjuncts must make it, I should say, impossible for you to pronounce. Miss Greville," he said, suddenly turning to Venetia as if he dared not trust himself longer with the man whom he so much despised, "now that you have conquered your little difficulty, will you mind singing me that song I like so much—'Grant but my Prayer?'"

He rose and held out his hand in a manner that scarcely admitted of a refusal; it seemed to take consent so much for granted.

"If you like," stammered Venetia, rising too.

"And you?" said Ernest, bending down to Graziella.

She let her pretty eyes droop.

"Oh!" she half whispered, playing with her fan, "I would rather stay here. But don't let me keep you if you would prefer to go with them," she added, sweetly. "I have a headache, and do not want to be in the house."

"As if I could prefer to go with them!" said Ernest, Venetia and the colonel being well out of hearing. "As if I would not rather be with you than any one in the world, my little queen!—with you rather than in heaven, you being indeed my heaven!"

She smiled.

"All the same, I don't think you like to see that long man make love to Venetia," she said, prettily.

He kissed her hand, and looked at her with his well-worn expression of worship.

"With this in mine, have I thought or care for any one else?" he asked.

"Am I expected to answer? Yes," was her reply.

He dropped her hand with a wounded air.

"Et tu, Brute! are you too of the tribe of the doubters?" he said, with half-playful sorrow. "I had believed better things of you, my queen."

"I am of the tribe of those who keep their eyes open, and know that two and two make four," said Graziella, with a charming smile and fiery glance.

"And those open eyes—those beautiful eyes that I should like to close with a kiss—what do they see?" asked Ernest, caressingly, but with just the faintest shade of mockery in his accent.

"What?" blazed out Graziella, passionately: "that you have not given up Venetia, and that you are still trying to keep her in love with you. Don't talk nonsense to me, Ernest! As if I did not know you!"

"Graziella, is that you?" he said, rising, with a deeply wounded air.

"Yes, it is me!" the Creole answered, with more passion than good grammar. "And just because it is me I speak the truth. Don't think that I am like that poor, spiritless Venetia who dares not call her soul her own before you, and who was so stupidly in love with you that you could make her believe anything you liked—that black was white if you chose to try. I love you very much in my way"—here she began to show signs of weakness—"very much indeed, Ernest. For your sake I have been a very naughty girl to the best friend I have, and the dearest darling that ever lived," wiping her eyes; "but for all that I can not see you go on like this, and put up with it."

"Go on like what, Graziella? My angel! what ideas have you in that sweet head?" remonstrated Ernest.

"Well, you know that you are trying to keep Venny with one hand, while you are playing on me with the other," cried Graziella. "And I cannot bear it, Ernest. I cannot, and I will not. It must be one thing or the other. You must either give up flirting with Venetia or being engaged to me. That is only fair. I don't flirt with any one else, and you ought not."

On which she turned her pretty little round shoulder to her lover, and began to sob hysterically.

"Graziella, I would rather shoot myself than see this," cried Ernest, in an agitated voice.

"You had better shoot me than go on so," sobbed Graziella. "If you like Venetia the best, say so; but don't try to keep us both."

"Graziella!" was all that Ernest could say, for indeed he was too utterly amazed at her clearness of vision and confused by this sudden accusation to know what else to say. After a moment's stupor, he took her hand and led her into the shrubbery, where they were out of sight of the house, and where no one could see or hear him. And there, having recovered himself, he comforted her handsomely; protesting that he did not care more for Venetia than he did for Honoria Morris; that he had never loved her, never thought of her otherwise than any man would naturally think of a nice kind of a girl who was pleasant to talk to and fairly intelligent; that he had never given her cause to think that he did; and that he had never loved in his life before—never, until he saw his queen, his pearl, his fairy-like Graziella, his exquisite and most dainty siren. Would she not believe him? he asked, as the burden in between these strophes of love, kissing her dainty little hand and worshipping her as he knew so well how.

No; at first she would not believe him, and went on sobbing as if she were really suffering, really breaking her heart for loving doubt. It was so pleasant to be petted and made love to! she did not care to shorten her enjoyment by giving in too soon; and she waited moreover to understand the extent of her power. Besides, she was really jealous; though she was not in sorrow, she was suffering so far as jealousy went; and to this extent her display was not all acting.

After a time, however, she let herself be slowly calmed down—slowly convinced to all appearances that Venetia was nothing to her lover, and never had been; and that she was every thing, and would be always as she had been from the beginning. In reality she was as incredulous and unconvinced as ever; but she knew when to give way; and as her vanity was fed, her jealousy soothed, and her love for Ernest satisfied for the moment, she had no reason for not granting the smiles which he said it would break his heart were she to withhold.

But from this time the halcyon days of their love were over. As it so often happens, one little blow breaks through the surface smoothness so that the harm done is never repaired, and the old state of things can never be re-

stored. That blow had now been given, and things went between them as it might be expected they would. With every outburst of jealousy from Graziella the habit of jealousy grew stronger, the outbursts easier, and were with more difficulty soothed away; with every fresh demand for stricter exclusiveness and more complete absorption, the chain between them shortened, till Ernest more than once regretted the sweet placidity, the trustful worship of his Beatrice—set aside for the disturbing charms of this enchanting little volcano beneath a garden of roses and fire-flies.

It was her volcanic nature, however, and the imperiousness of her selfishness overmastering his, that kept him steady. They were perhaps the only things that could. It was a question with him, as well as with some other men, of master or slave. He must dominate entirely or be entirely subdued; he could not live side by side with a woman as an equal; and Graziella had cleverly seen this characteristic from the beginning, and as cleverly profited by her insight. She had determined that he should not be her master—hence that he should be her slave; and she fulfilled her determination to the letter. If his traditional soul remained his own, certainly his eyes, his time, his speech, his attention were not; and she made him understand this, and that he was hers and no other person's, and especially not Venetia's.

Her, indeed, she watched with unappeasable suspicion, though her watching never brought her an inch of foothold against the loyalty of the friend whom she had supplanted. And though, when she was not in the room, Ernest still went on with his prose poems on friendship, and still tried to make Venetia understand that she was as dear to him as ever—only, for some cause never rightly explained, she had been left and the other taken—yet in her presence she had established so much influence as to make him cool almost to ill-breeding to the "poor little thing" who had loved him without cause, and whom he had never tried to win—never!

His varying manner created, little vain as Venetia was, a certain feeling of revulsion as a woman, that was not unwholesome as a styptic; and when she remembered all that had been and endured all that was, with interludes of prose poems on friendship and subtle arts of love-making when Graziella was not in sight or hearing, she scarcely knew which she despised most—her past self or his present personality; with whom she was most indignant—with him that he should dare to offer or with herself that she should be made the object of secret attentions as degrading to her to receive as to him to offer.

The consequence of it all was that she grew colder and colder to Ernest, he in return more anxious to keep what he had lost; that Graziella, who had eyes which nothing could blind, saw through the whole position clearly, and while as charming to Ernest as ever when not in a state of open mutiny and revolt, considered how she should best revenge herself; and that Venetia, for mere protection if not for liking, grew more and more intimate with Colonel Camperdown and his sister, and more and more averse from private moments with Ernest Pierrepont.

Still they came sometimes. They came this afternoon when the three were on the way to the river-side, and Venetia had kept behind to give the lovers the conventional *tete-a-tete*. But Graziella, who was in a bad humor, had walked on in front; and Ernest, with a sudden show of politeness, had waited for Venetia.

"I so seldom see you for a moment alone now," he said, in a low voice, as they walked down the garden drive. "You, who were once my comfort—my guardian angel." He sighed. "And I who need so much comfort now!"

He sighed again. Life was very dreary to him. He wished Venetia to understand this, and to console him.

"I am sorry to hear you say this," she answered. "I should have thought you had more need of congratulation than comfort."

"You can say that sincerely?" He looked into her eyes

yearningly—his own so handsome, tender—speaking as if wishing to read her very soul.

"I am generally sincere in what I say," answered Venetia, gravely; "why should you doubt me?"

"I should have thought you saw more clearly," he said, with meaning. "I thought our souls were more in unison than I find they are."

Again he sighed, those handsome, speaking eyes searching her face.

Venetia blushed to the roots of her hair. For all a woman's good resolutions, for all the discovery of the sordid truth, the romance lying round the first love never quite goes; and just for the instant Ernest's voice and eyes and manner made the old chord vibrate with the old dear harmonies.

"I am sorry," was all she said, her face full of tenderness; and Graziella turned around just at the inopportune moment.

How strangely different everything was this grey and cloudy afternoon from what it had been on that exquisite evening when they had rowed to St. Herbert's Isle, and poor Venetia's golden idol had given way about the feet, and had sunk into the sand forever! Yet they were the same boatful that had pulled up the stream, singing part songs and dreaming dreams—the one to the world, the other for themselves.

Again Venetia sat in the stern and steered; and again Graziella nestled like a tropical bird on her shawls and cushions, and stole glances from under her broad white eyelids and from beneath her long curved lashes. But the glances were not all for Ernest to-night, and blue-eyed Charley had his share. She had given up Colonel Camperdown by now, as we know, having found him impenetrable and impracticable; but honest Charley, Venetia's faithful dog, and so generously beloved by Emily, Graziella thought might prove a more facile instrument of chastisement when Ernest was wrong, and at all events he would be a handsome pendant to her first conquest.

Yes, the world was right; Mr. Pierrepont and Miss Despues were eminently "made for each other."

It was not to be St. Herbert's Isle to-night, but Friar's Point, further up the river, where there was a bog, a steep climb, a rough path, and a water-fall. The water-fall was one of the show places in the neighborhood; but it was a difficult passage for those not to the manner born, and pretty little dainty persons, like Graziella, with pretty little dainty feet lightly shod, required a great deal of help everywhere.

Graziella had still those two faces on her mind when she turned round at the inopportune moment—Ernest's yearning, tender, suffused; Venetia's tender and suffused too. She saw that something of a confidential nature had been said; and she disallowed things of a confidential nature to pass between them. And having these two faces on her mind, she had asked Charley Mossman to help her out of the boat and through the first roughness, and was now some distance in advance of the rest, close at his heels in the middle of the bog.

Presently she gave a short scream. The step she had to make between two tussocks of reeds was rather wide, and she stood on the point helplessly, and screamed in the prettiest little way possible.

Charley, over the foot-wide gulf, looked infinitely disturbed.

"Oh! I never can do it, Mr. Mossman!" and her voice and look were of that helpless and confiding kind which, when they belong to a fascinating little person with a waist that you can span, and maddening eyes, appeal irresistibly to broad-shouldered men able to carry heavy weights and endure Herculean fatigue.

"It is only a jump," cried Charley, re-assuringly, holding out his large, strong hand.

"But I cannot jump!" said Graziella, sweetly impotent.

"Oh, yes; try. It is nothing, I assure you," said Charley.

"I shall fall in," she answered, still helpless and despairing.

"I promise you not," he returned, earnestly.

"I shall! I know I shall!" said Graziella; and by this time the rest of the party came up, wondering what the difficulty was. Ernest was behind—the last of all. He had a woman's horror of muddy boots, and a cat's of wet feet; so he picked his way carefully among the tussocks, and avoided those treacherous stretches of yellow moss, reddened with sun-dew, as if he had been a young lady shod for a ball. Hence he was of no use to the girls, and was not at hand to help Graziella.

"What is it?" asked Colonel Camperdown, who was attending to Venetia and his sister Emily. It was as natural that he should attend to Venetia now as once it had been natural that Ernest Pierrepont should; and she was happier with him than with any one else. He was her "brother;" and brothers are so dear to the sisters—who are not their mothers' daughters.

"Miss Despues is afraid of the jump," said Charley, who thought her none the less lovely for her timidity.

"It is nothing," said Colonel Camperdown, shortly.

"Oh yes, it is; I can never do it," said Graziella.

"Indeed, Gracie dear, it is nothing," echoed Venetia; and to give color to her assertion she made the little jump lightly, and crossed without even a hand to help her.

"Oh, but you are so big and strong!" pouted Graziella, as if Venetia had been a six-foot grenadier. "I can not do half the rough things that you do."

"I am not much bigger than you, and I can do it," said Emily Backhouse, with unmitigated disdain, as she took her brother's hand and followed Venetia cleanly.

"Yes, but you have been born and brought up here, and I have not," said Graziella. "Things come easier to girls who have been used to scramble about such places all their lives than they do to poor little me. I have not been used to bogs in my beautiful country;" as if Emily had been the typical bog-trotter, and had lived on tussocks of rushes and jumping spans of yellow moss all her life. "Oh!" as Ernest came up, "I am so sorry to make all this fuss, but I cannot get across this place!"

"It is a nasty place," said Ernest, sympathetically. In his own distaste for this uncouth kind of work he quite understood her despair.

"But what is to be done?" said Charley.

"Some one must carry me," said Graziella, holding out her arms as a child might. With the most enchanting simplicity, the most bewitching ingenuousness, she looked up into Charley's face. "You, Mr. Mossman," she said; "you are the strongest, and I am not very heavy."

Venetia opened her eyes, and Emily said, beneath her breath, "Little wretch!" Colonel Camperdown laughed, not pleasantly, and turning to Ernest, said contemptuously:

"And you stand by and see that, Mr. Pierrepont?" shrugging his shoulders.

But Ernest laughed back as gayly and unconcernedly, in appearance, as if he had no part in the matter at all, and answered:

"Why not? You strong fellows are the natural porters of the race; now a sack of coals, and now a pretty woman—what does it matter?"

Charley, his fair face flushed like a girl's, and his heart beating more than he would have cared to own, cut the conversation short by taking Graziella in his arms and carrying her over half a dozen such places without stopping; she leaning back as in an arm-chair, with her pretty little hands clasped round his neck—to steady herself.

When she was set down on the dry land once more, and had laughed and looked and lisped her thanks, she waited for Ernest to come up.

"What a pity it is that you are not as strong as that good Mr. Mossman!" she said, in the sweetest voice that she had—and she had more voices than one. "It was so funny being carried like that; but," looking into his face, "it

would have been so nice if it had been you instead of that great, clumsy fellow."

"Oh, for the matter of that, I dare say he did quite as well as I or any one else," said Ernest, with false good humor.

She pouted.

"Do you judge me by yourself?" she asked. "Would it have been as pleasant to you to have carried any one else as me?"

"That depends," said Ernest.

"Venetia, I suppose?"

"Yes, Venetia would not be a disagreeable burden to any man," answered Ernest, flicking off some dust from his coat sleeve.

"You had better go to her, then; I dare say she will not tell you to go away, unless she likes Colonel Camperdown better," said Graziella, with dangerous sweetness; and, without another word, she turned back and joined herself to Charley Mossman and Emily Backhouse—poor Emily!—throwing out so many lines of fascination that the poor fellow, soft as he was in certain directions, grew confused, and wondered what on earth it all meant, and did it really mean that—It was the kind of thing to make such a man as he lose his head; and this was what Graziella had counted on.

But she had not counted on Colonel Camperdown, who was not the kind of man to lose his. And he kept Charley pretty straight for the moment, if he a little hurt his pride, by half a dozen words which rubbed off some of the gilt and tore down a few of the cobwebs.

"You will not be taken in by that little witch, will you, Mossman?" he said, over their cigars that night. "She is playing a game, Heaven only knows what, and you are marked out as the victim."

"I cannot think her bad," said poor Charley, ruefully.

"Miss Greville did not think that fellow bad, nor see her friend's treachery; which was patent to every one else," he answered. "However, it is no business of mine; but I should be sorry to see you in a mess."

"Oh, I can take care of myself," said Charley, a little crossly; and Harold changed the conversation.

This happened just about the time when Graziella and Ernest, in the midst of a tremendous quarrel, for the first time in their affairs appealed to Venetia as the judge between them: and when she for the first time in her life paltered with the truth and did not say what she thought; which was—that Graziella had been decidedly in the wrong about Charley, and that Ernest had been just as much to blame about herself.

CHAPTER X.

WAR.

GRAZIELLA was a young lady with theories somewhat in advance of her experience. And one of these was, that no girl should show her lover, no woman her husband, how much she cared for him. Men, according to her, should be always kept in the attitude of expectant supplication, of submissive adoration, with a wholesome fear of consequences should they dare to relax; and to make them sure of their holding was to destroy what was most valuable in their love, namely, their sense of insecurity, with the means to be taken to win better terms for themselves.

"If you are kind to them one day, you should be cool the next. It is so good to tantalize them," she said one day to Venetia, with an air of profound wisdom. "Nothing can be so stupid as to show any man how much you love him, or to let him think that he is dearer to you than you are to him. We should be always queens—never slaves. And that is my advice to you, Venny, if ever you are engaged; unless you want to be unhappy and lose your lover by too much love."

In pursuance of which theory, Graziella, now that the early days of enchantment were over and the halcyon seas disturbed, set herself with deliberation to show Ernest

Pierrepoint that he was not secure, and that if she chose she could, and if he did not mind what he was about she would. And the rod with which she ruled him was his jealousy of Charley Mossman on the one side, and her jealousy of Venetia on the other. If he paid ordinary attention to Venetia, and sometimes more than ordinary in spite of all the girl's own endeavors to prevent it, she flirted with Charley Mossman; and the more her lover showed annoyance, the more she gave him cause. She had no great difficulty in this, for Charley was, as we have said, a soft kind of person where women were concerned, and far too simply honest, for his own part, to suspect the dishonesty of others.

Though Ernest's love was as sacred to Charley as any other man's would have been—which is saying every thing—still, if a beautiful little creature shows you that she likes you better than her own assigned particular he, what can you do? he used to think, with mingled pleasure and discomfort, when Graziella played off her sweetest airs on him, and gave him to understand that she thought him far nicer than Ernest, and wished—what? He was made to feel as if in a mill, good, honest, stupid fellow, where he was hammered on by conflicting feelings, and turned round by bewildering influences, till he was dizzy and did not know his own footing.

The whole thing, indeed, was a vicious circle. Charley's facility for victimization made Graziella more and more determined to keep him as a make-weight against Ernest's roving propensities; Ernest, inflamed with jealousy and inflated with vanity, drew off to Venetia in part for consolation, in part for revenge—not doubting that he had only to beckon to his past love to be reinstated in his old place and have all his old privileges restored. Graziella, on her side, inflamed with jealousy and inflated with vanity, flirted with Charley still more audaciously as a set-off, and quarreled with Ernest still more bitterly as a punishment; and then both appealed to the harassed common friend, and each demanded her candid opinion—which meant her unqualified approval and unshared sympathy.

Uncertain what to do, and unable to say what she knew, she took refuge in silence, by which she offended both, and got from each just as much blame as if she had taken the other side outright. It was, in truth, a miserable time of turmoil and distress; and her only pleasure was when Ernest and Graziella, reconciled after an outbreak, went away out of sight and hearing altogether, and she was left alone, or with Colonel Camperdown and his sister Emily—almost as often now at Oak-tree House as Ernest or Charley Mossman.

Here, at least, were no love-makings and no jealousies, no quarrelings and no excited reconciliations, but only quiet friendship and peaceful meetings—Harold standing to her as her brother, or rather as a nineteenth-century impersonation of Great-heart, while good, plain, affectionate Emily, if less an object of idealizing worship than fairy-like and fascinating Graziella, was infinitely more satisfactory as a sisterly kind of friend. Harold, too, though his conversation was divested of all dazzling attributes, though he neither sang nor talked of art, nor yet rolled out misty phrases of glittering nonsense, was so solid, so strong, so eminently manly and trustworthy, that Venetia was beginning to think that perhaps these were qualities more to the purpose in life than poetical charm, and that, man with man, Colonel Camperdown was the most worthy of respect of any whom she knew.

"I wish that he had been my brother," she one day said to herself, with a sigh. "He would not have let me get into all my trouble if he had been. Only I think he judges poor Mr. Pierrepoint a little harshly," put in her generous, tender self, woman-like unable to condemn as he deserved the man who had won her first love—though he had flung it aside when he had got it as if it had been of no more value than a bit of *bric-a-brac*—a cracked china tea-cup, say, or a *bon-bonniere* of Battersea enamel. But the true

woman, God bless her! is forgiving; and Venetia was essentially the true woman.

"Which do you like the best?" asked Graziella of Ernest one day, after they had made up a tremendous quarrel about nothing in the world that any one could understand, and Venetia had been the peace-maker.

"The best of what?" he answered.

"Angels or demons?" she said, leveling her beautiful eyes at him. "For myself, I think that angels are a little insipid; don't you? They are very sweet and all that, but a trifle too sugary for my taste."

"What am I expected to say?" returned Ernest, smiling as if he read nothing of her secret meaning and was really occupied with the question as put. "If I say demons, where do I place you? But you have given your verdict against the angels, and truly you are not one of the insipid kind that you have described?"

"No," said Graziella, quietly, "I am not angel. Venny is, if you like; but I am not."

"Are you a demon, then?" he returned, his handsome eyes laughing into hers.

"You would say so," she said, smiling back into his. "You think worse of me than any one in the world has ever done," with a delicious little look—one of those looks which challenge a man's profoundest adulation. "I know quite well that I am a demon, a horrid little demon, in your eyes, Ernest."

"So? who told you this?" he asked, still smiling.

"Yourself," said Graziella. "You admire Venny too much to admire me. Tell me, Ernest dear," putting on a pretty, matter-of-fact, but yet wholly sincere and interested air, "why did you not marry Venetia Greville?"

"Because of Graziella Despues," he answered, forgetting at the moment how often and how solemnly he had sworn that he had never had any other feelings for the "poor little thing" than one of the most tepid and subdued admiration, and that there had never been even the ghost of what is called "love-making" between them.

"And if I had not come?" she said, caressingly, her hands clasped on his arm and her eyes looking up into his. "You would have married her then?"

"Yes," he answered, kissing her hand. "Think what I should have missed."

"Oh, you are bound to say that now," said Graziella, a little coldly. She unclasped her hands and withdrew her eyes. "Of course you can not tell me to my face that you would rather have married some other girl, but I dare say you feel in your heart that you would."

"I dare say I do not," he answered, with a greater show of patience than he felt; for her perpetual uneasiness of temper was trying him more than he cared to own just yet to himself. He liked a little of it. It excited him, gave color to his life, and kept his love alive; but there is a world of difference between swimming and drowning, and just now he felt drowning rather than swimming.

"Poor, dear Venetia! I am sure I am very sorry that I ever came to stand in her way like this," Graziella went on to say with great compassion, admirably put on. "If I had known that you were in love with her, Ernest, I would have gone to school at once, instead of staying here to make her miserable. I am very sorry for all—I am sure I am!"

"It is rather late in the day for remorse, my darling," said Ernest, dryly; "and I do not think that you have learned any thing more now than what you knew before."

"That means that I tell stories," said Graziella. "I am very much obliged to you, Ernest. It is not often that girls hear such things from gentlemen. It is a new experience at all events," with a short laugh, rising from the seat under the horse-chestnut where so much of their love-making and bickering was transacted.

"Good God! Graziella, what has come to you of late?" cried Ernest. "You seem possessed by the determination to make me miserable! I cannot please you now, do what I may, and you only seek occasion for quarreling with me."

What does it all mean? Tell me only what you want me to do, or not to do, and I will do anything you like—be any thing to please you. Let us understand each other, in Heaven's name, for this kind of thing cannot go on!"

"If you want to break off our engagement, say so, Ernest," said Graziella; "but don't try to throw the blame on me."

"I think it is you who want to break it off," retorted Ernest, uncomfortably.

"Oh! I would never ask any man to keep to me who did not wish it himself," said Graziella, tossing her little head. "If you are tired of me, you have only to say so, and you will not find me so very anxious to keep to you."

"You are unjust, Graziella," said Ernest.

"And you are cruel," answered Graziella.

Which, by-the-by, he was not; but it is a safe and easy accusation to make against a lover, and one that comes quite naturally to a woman when she is in the wrong.

At this moment Charley Mossman rode up to the door, and Graziella saw him. So did Ernest.

"I am going to dear Venny," she said, suddenly.

Ernest lounged up from the seat.

"Yes," he said, affectedly, "let us go in and see dear Venny. She is always so sweet and tranquil—like a moonlight evening in July."

"After a storm, I suppose?" Graziella returned.

"After a storm," said Ernest.

"I see Mr. Mossman; what a nice, dear fellow he is!" the Creole said, with as much affectation as her lover; "so sweet-tempered and honest and faithful—a man that one can trust so thoroughly—a man that would never pretend the same thing to two girls at once, and that would be constant and amiable for life. He and Venny would make such a splendid couple! Don't you think so?"

"Indeed, yes," yawned Ernest; "an ideal couple; both fair, tall, good-natured, and moonlight colored."

"Or Venny and that handsome Colonel Camperdown," resumed the Creole, seeing that her former harpoon had not struck.

The man's pale face flamed. He could afford to accept the suggestion which gave Venetia to Charley, whom he despised as the shifty and clever despise the honest and obtuse; but he could not pretend indifference to the chances of Harold Camperdown, whom he hated because he feared, and by whom he knew himself to be gauged and measured.

"I do not think you show yourself very careful for your friend's happiness in making such a choice as this for her," he said loftily; but it was a loftiness which it was not very difficult to see through. "Of all men living I think Colonel Camperdown the least fit to take care of such a woman as Miss Greville."

"Why?" asked Graziella, always walking towards the house. "What have you against him? I am sure he is most delightful when he chooses—much more delightful than you, Ernest, when you are in one of your odious tempers—like to-day."

"You would like me to say the same thing of Miss Greville to you, would you not?" flared out Ernest, hotly.

"I should like you to be sincere enough to be able to say it," she answered, coolly.

Which last amenity brought her to the drawing-room window, standing open to the lawn. Passing through with her pretty gliding step she went in, saying, "Venny, dear!" to stop confusedly and add, "Oh, Mr. Mossman, you here!" as if his being there was a thing both unknown to her and of supreme importance—something to make her blush and hesitate, look shyly down and then look shyly up; in short, put on all the airs of pretty consciousness by which young women know their power and learn that they are dangerously dear.

Whereupon Ernest, going up to Venetia, said, in his most dulcet tones, but loud enough to be heard by all present:

"Gracie and I," familiarly, "have been talking of you,

Miss Greville," respectfully. "We have been comparing you to the sweet restfulness of a moonlight night in July, and have both agreed to consider you an angel."

"And you know what that means, Venny—you who know Mr. Pierrepont so well—that I, poor me, am just the reverse of an angel," lisped Graziella. "Mr. Mossman," turning to Charley, still keeping her air of bashful consciousness, but speaking as if trying to conquer her confession of his dangerous dearness, "don't you think I must be very good-natured to let Mr. Pierrepont say such things to me? For, after all, though I am very, very, very fond of dear Venny, can it be pleasant to hear one's self called a little demon and one's friend praised as an angel?" pouting.

"It is a bad kind of joke," said Charley, flushing. "For myself, I hate such things, even in jest."

"Dear old boy!" said Ernest, with a fine shade of contempt penetrating his pretended affection. "Always the same honest heart; a little verdant, perhaps, but always honest."

"Better be green than—" Charley was going to say "bad," but he stopped himself. It was rather too big a stone to fling at the head of his *quondam* Pylades; and, after all, he had no business to put his fingers into the love-pie that was smoking before him. If he did he must expect to get them burned; and burned fingers are not so pleasant as singed wings, all things considered. The pain is the same, and the process less desirable.

"What does it all mean?" Charley asked of Venetia, anxiously, when they were alone. "Are not things going well between those two?"

"Not very," said Venetia, steadily, though it was painful to her, for many reasons, to have to confess this.

"Whose fault is it?" he asked.

"Both," she said.

"His, I can quite believe," flashed out Charley, with supreme disdain; "but hers?"

"Yes, hers as well as his. She tries him fearfully by her jealousy and exactingness, and he tries her by his want of sincerity. And they both"—here she blushed crimson—"they both flirt, one as much as the other."

It was Charley's turn to blush now.

"Ah!" he said, with a deep breath, "then it is only flirting?"

"Only," returned Venetia, looking at him kindly. "So do not be deceived, Mr. Mossman. Graziella loves Mr. Pierrepont as well as she can love any thing, but she is fond of admiration, and does not always think. She would not break off her engagement with Ernest for any man in the world—that I am sure of; and she will only make any one else unhappy who believes that she will."

"Is that meant as a warning?" asked Charley.

"Yes," she answered.

"Thank you," he said. "You have done me a great service, for she is fascinating."

Venetia's eyes filled with tears.

"Ah! I know that!" she said, tenderly; "but, for all her fascination, she is not to be trusted. I know her now—I never did before; but I have been obliged to confess to myself, sorrowfully enough, that she has not as much truth or heart as I once thought she had."

"At any rate," said Charley, viciously, "whatever she may be, she is good enough, and too good, for Ernest Pierrepont."

"So she may be," said Venetia; "but"—her first essay in intentional match-making—"not half so good as Emily Backhouse. What a darling Emily is! I have found her out lately. I never knew her before."

"Yes, Emily Backhouse is very good," said Charley, with affectionate indifference; "as good a girl as ever lived. But she has not Miss Despues's charm."

"She has something better," returned Venetia, and then the conversation dropped; but from this time Charley Mossman put Graziella out of his thoughts, and decided within himself against both burned fingers and singed

wings, and the folly of giving way to fancies, because a pretty little person had lovely eyes and a bewildering way of using them.

So things dragged on, wearily and uncomfortably enough for every one. Graziella could not go back to school because of the infection still lingering in the house. She had no relations in England, no connections of any kind, and no place of asylum possible until her guardian should return from abroad. Hence, being here, it was only common humanity to keep her; and, though day by day, as Venetia's eyes were being more thoroughly opened to the true characters of her former ideal and her worshiped little queen alike—and with this increase of knowledge a corresponding decrease of love and esteem for both—still she had to make the best of things as they were, and to steer her way among the shallows deftly. She had to conceal from Graziella, so far as she could in honesty, how radically she was changing in feeling for her, and while bearing frank testimony, when called on to do so, against her various misdemeanors, to avoid anything that looked like partisanship with Ernest. And she had to make Ernest understand that when she took part against him it was not pique, and when for him it was not love.

It was a difficult position all through, but gentleness and sincerity generally guide us safely enough in moments of difficulty, as Venetia found now. She said her say when she had to be frank, but she said it gently, and had no scene in consequence; for Graziella, with all her jealousy and suspicion, could not accuse her of trying to win back Ernest, whatever she might say to him of his endeavors to win back her; and the gradual cooling of her love for Graziella, as well as her better knowledge of Ernest, came about so natural that neither could find the moment when to turn against her and accuse her—the one of inconstancy, the other of changed respect.

And always, while matters grew worse and feelings more complicated, and the disputes between the two lovers more frequent in occurrence and more embittered in tone, Colonel Camperdown became of greater use and more comforting assurance to Venetia. She carried her troubles to him, and he helped her as men of good sense and experience can help women who will consent to be guided. But if it made the present easy, it was endangering the future; and more than once Venetia said to herself, with a kind of terror which she could not control:

"What will become of me when he goes back to India?"

CHAPTER XI.

PEACE.

ONE day Ernest and Graziella, who had been going ill for some time now, came to the worst of the bad places through which they had as yet journeyed. They had a quarrel which threw all the rest into the shade for the wild words spoken, and the injustice and insanity of the accusations flung broadcast on both sides. It began on the old theme—Graziella's jealousy of Venetia; which was not without cause so far as Ernest was concerned, though entirely baseless on this occasion, as on all others, so far as related to Venetia. She was too loyal for the one part, and too much out of love for the other, to interfere with them in any way; but that did not hinder the Creole from cherishing her suspicions like certainties, and making both her lover and herself miserable in consequence. She still maintained in spite of everything that Ernest made love to Venetia—which was true; and that Venetia encouraged him—which was not true, but which did quite as well for a weapon of accusation as if it had been.

From quarreling about Venetia, and that which was and that which was not, they drifted into general accusations of the manifold sins and wickedness which each discerned in the other, and the various misdemeanors that characterized the dealings of both. Each lost temper, dignity, and good-breeding; and those bitter things were said which, when once uttered, are never wholly forgotten—things which people may pretend or even wish to forget and forgive, but which at the best are like weeds that are buried only skin deep, to come to the surface on the slightest stirring of the soil.

At last said Graziella, flinging herself aside:

"I hate you, Ernest! You are a deceitful wretch, and you know it! I have lost all my love for you, and I do not believe a word you say. I never want to see you again—never!"

"I should be sorry to go against your wishes, Miss Despues," said Ernest, suddenly calmed into formal politeness. He arose from the seat, took off his hat, and bowed with the stateliness of a Sir Charles Grandison preparing to dance a minuet. "After this I suppose you have nothing else to say?" he continued.

"Nothing," said Graziella, defiantly.

"Then I have the honor to bid you farewell," said Ernest, with another

bow more horribly polite and formal than even the last, as he turned away and left the fragments of their little house of cards scattered on the ground—scattered so that surely they would never be gathered together and made into a habitable mansion again.

Graziella stood with her back turned toward him, not thinking that he would carry out his threat of leaving her—not expecting that he would accept his dismissal even though she had given it.

She gave herself credit for more power, and believed more entirely in his subjection. When she heard the lodge-gates swing to, and knew that he had gone, she dashed into the house in a tempest of angry despair, and flinging herself on the ground at Venetia's feet, burst into a torrent of tears.

"What is it now, Gracie?" asked Venetia, with a high sigh of weariness mixed with her compassion.

She knew very well that, whatever the momentary form, the thing would be the same as so often before—fighting because of shadows, but fighting with real weapons and dealing cruel blows, though the cause was only shadows.

"I have quarreled with Ernest for good and all!" sobbed Graziella. "Oh, Venny, he has said the most awful things to me that you can imagine! He is a wretch, and I hate him, and hope that I shall never see him again."

"If you think him such a wretch, and are so glad to get rid of him, you ought not to cry like this," said Venetia, gravely. "But what has he done that you should say you hate him? Has he only been in fault, Gracie?"

"There, that is just like you, Venetia! You go and take his part at once without knowing any thing. Of course you do!" cried Graziella, her eyes flashing through their tears. "I knew that you would when I came to you. I have no one in the world to take my part—no one. No father or mother here, and you don't care for me any more. You only care to defend Ernest."

And then she buried her face in Venetia's lap again, and sobbed against the knees of the one whom she had just been accusing of unfriendliness and partiality.

"Is that fair, Gracie dear?" asked Venetia's sweet voice, tenderly. "Have I ever been anything but a true friend to you through it all? You know that I have been your friend, and you should not accuse me of taking his part against you. It is not true."

"Forgive me, dear, good Venny!" cried Graziella, softening as suddenly, as inexplicably, as she had raged before. She took Venetia's fair, cool hands, and laid them on her forehead. "Feel how it is burning," she said, piteously. "Oh, Venny, I am so miserable! I am almost out of my mind, and scarcely know what to do or say. Only help me, dear, out of this trouble. It is the worst I have ever been in, and you are my only friend—the only one I have in the world!" weeping afresh.

"But what has happened, dear?" said Venetia. "I will help you if I can—you may be sure of that; but how can I if I know nothing? Tell all, and let me see what I can do."

"I have had a frightful quarrel with Ernest, and we have separated, and bid each other good-by forever," said Graziella. "I told you!" a little crossly; "and I can tell you no more if I were to talk till to-morrow."

"And what do you want now?" Venetia asked. "Do you want to separate from him or to make it up?"

"I want him to make it up," said Graziella, with emphasis. "I want him to make an apology. He ought, for he said such dreadful things to me; you never heard such things, Venny."

"And you, Gracie, to him—what? Ah, little dear, I am afraid you had your full share!"

"But then I am the girl, and have the right," said Graziella, quickly. "That is different."

"I don't quite see that," said Venetia. "Being the girl does not make wrong right; and if you have said what you should not, you are as much to blame as he is."

"Oh, of course—of course! anything to screen Ernest!" cried Graziella, lifting her head.

"Now, Graziella, understand once for all there must be an end to this," said Venetia, with sudden sternness. "If I am to help you, you must have some kind of trust in me. I will do all for you that I can; but how can I do any thing if you go thinking that I am unjust to you, and care only for Mr. Pierrepont? You know that I did care for him once very much; I can never care for any one else, I think, as much as I did for him." Here her voice faltered and her mild eyes filled with tears, but more from the remembrance of what she had suffered than from any active suffering now. It was regret for what had been, not for what was. After a moment she was calm and unmoved again. "But you know in your heart, Gracie," she went on to say, "that never—never once since your engagement have I tried to win a single look from him; and that I have honestly done my best to kill both my love and my disappointment—and that I have succeeded." This last she said with emphasis.

Her manner, her look, her tone, all sobered and overawed the little Creole. It was not often that Venetia asserted herself in this way; when she did, she produced all the more effect. Graziella lowered her eyes, ashamed. "Yes, I know all that, Venny," she said, in a rather humble voice; "but, all the same, I am sure he loves you better than me, and that he regrets his choice of me instead of you. I am as certain of this as of my own existence."

"Oh, Gracie, your jealousy will ruin your life!" cried Venetia. "Do have some trust. Mr. Pierrepont does not love me; he does love you; and I do not love him any longer. What more can you want? You knew everything when you accepted him—all there was to know, that is, which was not much. Why cannot you be content? Life is impossible with such constant jealousy and suspicions."

Graziella looked up.

"Well, I will trust you," she said, with what was to her fiery, narrow, selfish little soul a burst of generous magnanimity. "Only bring him to his senses, Venny, and make him apologize."

"And if this quarrel is got over, will you promise to try and keep peace?" cried Venetia. "You might be so happy together, you two—made for each other as you are—if only you would leave off this dreadful quarreling. I can not understand it, Gracie. It would simply kill me; I could not bear it for a day."

"I will try to be good," said Graziella. "If I get over this, I promise you I will not quarrel any more. Only make us friends again; but make him apologize."

"You promise, Gracie?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Faithfully?"

"Faithfully."

"That's my own darling little queen once more!" cried Venetia, kissing her tenderly with a burst of her old enthusiasm. "All will come right in the end, dear, if you will but keep your word. And now trust me; I will do what I can for you, darling; and you will be good and wise, and leave off all jealousies and suspicions, will you not?"

"Yes," said Graziella, "I will."

And at that moment she really meant what she said.

On which Venetia sat down and wrote a pretty little note to Ernest, saying that she and Graziella would be at the old mill to-morrow morning, and that they would be so glad if he would go too, as both (underlined) wanted to speak to him. He was to be sure and not say no, as this was the first time that she, Venetia, had asked a favor of him, and she would be dreadfully hurt if he refused.

When Ernest got the note he read it over three times.

"What a lovely handwriting!" he said to himself, examining every letter critically; "just like herself all through!" he kissed the paper lightly. "What a fool I have been!" he said, half aloud. "I threw away the gold for—what? Something that is certainly not gold."

So Nemesis was working at last. She is seldom long idle.

It was an awkward meeting the next day, when the tryst was kept in the wood by the old mill; and the place which had once been poor Venetia's temple of happiness and hope was transferred to the service of repairing the damage done to the loves of Ernest and Graziella. But Venetia had chosen this place purposely, as the most complete assurance possible to her to give to both—to him, that she had shut him out of her heart finally and forever; to her, that she had not preserved even so much romance as makes a woman care to keep the memory of her dream sacred. All the same, it was awkward to her as to him; and she colored, and could not meet his eyes quite as frankly as she wished.

Graziella, whose good resolutions were never of long continuance, was a little sulky to begin with; and Venetia's blush and somewhat conscious face set the jealous blood in a flame, that did not look much like peace to come; and Ernest, who was recognizing more and more clearly his mistake, and whose vagrant fancy had flown back again to the calmness of the moonlight in preference to the fervent heat of the tropics, was not ashamed to confess to himself that to meet Venetia once more by the old mill was rather the inducement of the day than a reconciliation with Graziella, nor was he afraid to recognize in his deepest self that this reconciliation would be of no avail, and that his dream, too, was over. Whereby it came about that his eyes looked lovingly at Venetia and coldly at Graziella, and that the accent—that unmistakable accent—of truth was in his voice for the former, and not for the latter, when he greeted both and expressed his pleasure at seeing them.

After a few halting, hesitating phrases, every one playing at pretense—ven Venetia, soul of truth that she was, unable to speak straight to the point, and feeling a revulsion against her former idol for his disloyalty to the one whom he had chosen to supplant her, such as she had never felt before, indignant with him, humiliated in herself, sorry for Graziella, but, girl-like, feeling also the tremendous sacredness of an engagement, and that now they were engaged they must make the best of it—taking Graziella's hand in hers, she said:

"Now, Gracie, dear, I am going to leave you for a little while. You will remember all that you have promised me, will you not, little dear? You might be so happy if you chose."

"If Miss Despues could but be guided by you, Miss Greville," said Ernest, with the tenderest accent, the most respectful air.

"Her own good sense and good heart will guide her better than I can," returned Venetia, coldly, and with a look of reproach.

"Mr. Pierrepont does not think so!" cried Graziella, spitefully.

Venetia held up her hand.

"Now, Gracie," he said, affectionately, but gravely, too, "your promise, remember! Mr. Pierrepont means nothing but what every one says of a cool-headed by-stander. So do not make small things into great ones; and good-by, darling, till I see you again; which will be in about an hour's time."

She kissed her, and by an effort looked at Ernest, then turned and left them, walking quickly down the path that led deeper into the wood. For an instant, Ernest stood balanced to follow her—his heart, or that thing in him which did duty for a heart, given back to her again; then he remembered his position and its obligations; but Graziella had read him, and the reconciliation that was to be, begun by her saying, in a mocking tone of voice:

"Well, Mr. Pierrepont, why do you not run after her?"

Walking rapidly along the path, Venetia came down to the part of the river which was crossed by the little wooden bridge that formed one of the most picturesque points in the wood. Standing on the bridge was a man fishing; and Venetia felt a sudden inrush of peace, and the sentiment of protection against even herself, as a second glance showed her that it was Harold Camperdown at his old sport.

How strangely like, and yet unlike, were the circumstances of this autumn day with those of the early summer, when he had come upon the three sketching the old mill, and had given Venetia the hidden warning, the concealed counsel, which then she had rejected as false in fact and cruel in spirit! What a dream it all seemed now! What a queer, unsubstantial bit of glamour! Much as she had suffered, she felt glad now that it was all over, and that the truth being what it was, she had learned it before too late. She had never felt so keenly the worthlessness of Ernest's character as she did to-day. Even the special quality of his beauty had lost its charm for her; and the light figure, with the pale face, poetic eyes, long dark hair, and make-up generally of a gentleman-like artist, all became factitious and unbeautiful when compared with the rougher, stronger manliness of the fisherman on the bridge turning his kind, brave face to where she stood among the trees, and smiling with unaffected gladness as he saw her.

He drew in his line, left the bridge, and came up to her.

"How is this?" he said, shaking hands with her kindly. "Alone? Where is your companion?"

"I left her at the mill with Mr. Pierrepont," said Venetia. "They had their own affairs to settle, so I came away."

"Their own affairs seem very often unsettled," said Harold, with a quick look into her face. "I have seldom seen a love affair so eminently unsatisfactory. They never seem to be in accord, and of the two I do not know which to pity most, though I can not say that I respect either."

"I am so sorry for them," sighed Venetia. "It makes me absolutely miserable to see all their wretchedness, and to know that it is self-made, and might be avoided if they would."

"And you would undo the engagement if you could, I suppose," Harold asked, looking down and speaking with a manifest effort to appear unconcerned.

"Oh, no!" cried Venetia. "Undo it? No! They will come all right after a time. It is only that they do not always understand each other. And then they are both impatient."

"And both give cause of impatience?" said Harold.

"Too much," she answered, with her tender frankness; adding again, "but it will come right after a time," as the charm by which all difficulties were to be smoothed away.

"You know my opinion of him," said Harold; "I need not repeat it."

"Yes, I know it," said Venetia, nervously.

"And you think me wrong?"

Again he looked into her face, searching it. There were some things of which he would be glad to be assured to-day; some things of which he had made up his mind to be assured before long, and the present seemed to him the manifest moment.

"You think me wrong?" he repeated.

"I think you—" she hesitated.

"Hard, perhaps?"

"A little."

"Unjust?"

"No, not exactly unjust; but—do not be angry with me, Colonel Camperdown—a little unmerciful."

"Does such a man deserve mercy?" he said, with bitterness.

"We all do," she answered, tenderly. "Which of us is faultless?"

"You, if any one!" he cried, with a strange expression on his face—the look of a man who dare not show what he feels.

Venetia shrank back and turned pale.

"Please do not flatter me," she said. "That is not like you, Colonel Camperdown, and I have had enough flattery to last my life."

"You are right," he answered, gravely. "I suppose, being a woman, you have your faults like any one else; but what I mean is, that I do not know them."

"That is because you do not know me," said Venetia, simply.

Again that odd look crossed his face.

"You must let me know as much of you as I can, see as much of you as is possible, before I go back to India," he said, playing with his line and not looking at Venetia.

"But you are not going yet?" she asked, anxiously.

"Oh, six months soon pass, and I have only a six months' leave," he said.

"I thought it was for two years," cried Venetia, in a tone of disappointment.

"No; for certain reasons I have taken only six months. Would you have liked it to have been two years?" he asked, very quietly, as if he had asked her would she have liked a red ribbon instead of a blue.

"Indeed, yes," Venetia said, frankly, thrown off her guard. "We shall all miss you dreadfully when you go. I do not know what we shall do without you."

"Do you mean that, Miss Greville—really mean it?" he said, speaking in a moved voice.

"That we shall all miss you? yes," she answered.

He took both her hands in his, and drew her gently to him.

"That you will miss me?" he said, with meaning.

She looked at him quite frankly and innocently; then her eyes dropped to the ground, she blushed vividly and trembled, but she did not speak.

"Is it so hard a thing to say?" he half whispered. "Or do you want to spare my pride and my love? Let me know my fate at once. I can not bear this suspense. Venetia, tell me, is there a future for me? Have you any feeling in your heart that may grow up into an enduring and life-long love? Do you think you shall ever care for me enough to wish me to be always with you? Tell me, dear, frankly, faithfully, tenderly, as you say all things."

"I do care for you very much, Colonel Camperdown," said Venetia, in a low voice.

"How much?" holding her hands, while she turned away her drooping face, shy, ashamed, embarrassed, but how happy. "How much?" he repeated, in almost a whisper.

"Perhaps as much as you would wish," said Venetia, also in a whisper, her blushing face drooping lower.

"God bless you, my darling—God bless you for that dear word! And you will stay with me always, my darling? You will be my wife—my loved, my cherished wife?"

"Do you care to make your wife of a girl who has been so silly as I have been?" she answered, her eyes filling with tears. "And after you tried to save me too!"

"As if that were anything now that it is all over!" he said. "Why, my darling, that was only a dream—a girl's fancy—a child's romance. That was not what our love will be. Ours is real; this was a mere play. Now that it has gone, and all your sorrow has passed and left me only the joy, I can well afford to laugh at it. No; that was not the truth, and this is. Is this the truth, Venetia?"

"Yes," said Venetia, timidly.

"Now I am repaid for all," he said. He took her in his arms and kissed her sweet face with as much reverence as love, while she felt as if she had, indeed, come out of a dream and was now, for the first time, fully awake to the truth and joy of life.

It was with a strange feeling of pain that Venetia forced herself to remember those other actors in the drama that was drawing now to an end. How terrible those quarrels seemed to her, happy and strong in the consciousness of a love that was real—a love that was as free from affectation as exaggeration, from self-deception as from chance of jealousy

or likelihood of change. And yet how sorry she was for both Graziella and Ernest that they had missed their way so fearfully, and brought so much trouble on their own heads! For herself, how glad for all that she had missed and all that she had gained!

And yet again, how ardently she wished that she had never seen Ernest Pierrepont—that she could have taken to Harold a heart that had never been touched by any other man—a fancy absolutely undisturbed by false shadows or deceiving images. But as that could not be, she was only conscious of deep thankfulness that she had been spared from the one for such glad acceptance of the other, and that she had passed through even the fire for the peace waiting for her on the other side. Yes, it was indeed all the difference between fancy and fact, imagination and reality, dreams and waking; and she said all this as she stood beside her lover, and bade him good-by, turning to encounter once more the ghosts of former follies and the realities of present pains.

"And you are happy?" he asked, as he held her hands in his and searched her face, at all times the mirror of her mind, and which was now as full of such glad delight as one might fancy would be on an angel's when there comes up to heaven the soul of the beloved left for some time on the earth.

"Happy?—yes," she said. "No one could be more so. I have found more than I ever expected to find—more than I had any right to expect: and it seems to me now that I can never know a day's sorrow again."

"You never shall, so far as I can shield you, my darling!" he said, tenderly. "What you have given to me I will preserve with my life, and as my life; and never through me shall you regret the precious words you have said to-day."

She looked into his eyes, her own as tender as his, then, with an indescribable expression of something that was more devotion than submission, she bent her head and raised his hand to her lips; and Harold was wise enough to accept her little act of womanly homage as it was meant, and not to spoil the sweet sentiment that it conveyed by a nineteenth century gallantry—which would have been out of place.

When Venetia met her luckless friends at the old mill, a glance at their faces and attitudes told her that no good had come of their attempt at reconciliation. Graziella was the step in advance, flushed, feverish, on moral stilts. Ernest was the step behind, pale, concentrated, viciously polite, because irreconcilably estranged. They had quarreled the whole time about Venetia, whom Graziella accused her lover of trying to win back, and who herself, she said, was willing to be won. Ernest, whom the former of these two accusations touched nearly enough, and who only hoped that the latter was true, defended himself hotly, all the more so because of that thread of truth which gave the thing its real meaning; and the result of each word from her and reply from him had been to pour acid on to wounds and heap fuel on to fire. It was not to be wondered at, then, that the whole thing came to an end now and forever; and that when they met, to Venetia, serene, fortified, blessed by her own experience, they were like people who had found the highest treasure of life and had willfully flung it into the mire!

"It is all over, Venny," said Graziella, defiantly, when Venetia joined them. "We have had our last talk, and nothing can ever reconcile us again. I hope never to see Mr. Pierrepont after to-day, and I am very sorry that I ever saw him at all."

Venetia looked from one to the other.

"Oh, what a pity that you cannot agree," she said, "and when you love each other so much?"

"Oh, no, we don't," said Graziella, still defiant. "It was all a mistake, Venny. Mr. Pierrepont loves you, not me, and I know now that I never cared for him. I was dazzled, and I wanted to see if I could win him from you; but I was never in love with him. I thought I was not at the time, and I know it now."

"Graziella!" cried Venetia, inexpressibly shocked.

"Well, you like the truth, Venny, and now you have it," said the pretty little person, audaciously. "So I shall go away to-morrow to my guardian, and write over to papa and tell him he need not give himself any trouble about my engagement; that it was all nonsense, and is now over. And if you tell the truth, Venny, you will say that you are very glad to get rid of me."

"You have no right to say that, Graziella," said Venetia, gravely.

"Oh, yes, I have, because it is the truth," she answered; "and I shall be very glad to go. It has been a horrid mistake all through."

Ernest had not spoken as yet; but when Graziella said this, and Vene-

tia's eyes turned to him asking confirmation, he said, in a freezing voice:

"Miss Despues is quite right, Miss Greville. It has been a mistake all through, as she says; and now"—here his voice suddenly changed from its cold, hard, bitter tones into the exquisite tenderness which he knew so well how to use—"the only thing for both to do is to retrace our steps and get out of the coil which we fancied was to be the everlasting band of love. The truth with me, and I fancy with her, lies in quite a different direction," his eyes fixed meaningly on Venetia.

But Venetia's face did not express the soft confusion, the under-flush of joy, that he had hoped to see. Was he too late? he thought. Had she really steeled her heart against him? She had loved him so much before—he had been so entirely the master of her emotions, her sentiments, her soul—he could not believe that she had taken herself from him so that he could not recover her again. No; it must be that he could win her back to himself in all her former blind enthusiasm, now that the truth had become clear to him, and that he knew it was Venetia whom he loved and Venetia whom he ought to marry.

He thought himself quite into tranquillity and certitude on this; and in a few days' time he went once more to Oak-tree House, and sat in the old place near Venetia's feet, and rolled out the old, high-sounding, vague, suggestive phrases which had been her soul's dearest food. But now, to-day, Venetia listened to him with a kind of wonder, saying to herself:

"Did I ever believe in all this, and think it fine and real? What a child I was three months ago! How ignorant and how silly!"

At last, Ernest said, abruptly:

"Do you know, Miss Greville, that our old friend, Charley Mossman, is engaged to Miss Backhouse—at last?"

"Yes," said Venetia.

"Ah! he told you, then?"

"No, he did not," she answered; "Colonel Camperdown told me," steadily.

"Is it not an example good to follow?" returned Ernest, though he did not like the introduction of Colonel Camperdown's name, and felt jarred and put of tune by it. He suddenly flung himself on his knees by her side, and tried to take her hands. "Dearest—dearest Venetia," he said, "let me hear you say yes—let me know that you have forgiven my temporary blindness, and that you love me still, and will be my wife."

"No—no—no!" cried Venetia, rising in disorder, and drawing her hands from his. "No! do not say such things to me, Mr. Pierrepont. I cannot hear them, and I will not."

He thought it was the disorder of a grieving tenderness too abruptly reassured.

"Dear, yes?" he pleaded, passionately; "have you not forgiveness, my beautiful lady—my saintly, sweet, and noble Beatrice?"

"Forgiveness?—yes, all—all heartily," she said.

"And love—love, my Venetia?"

"No—no love; and I am neither Venetia to you nor yours in any way," she answered, with more calmness and more pride.

"Your love for me has died?" he asked, incredulously.

"Yes, died forever. I have wakened out of my dream, and I could not go to sleep again."

"Yet you did love me," he said, with something of a menace—something of mocking in his voice.

"I did," she said, meeting his eyes; "you know that I did."

"And not now?"

"Not now—not now," she answered.

"And who has supplanted me?" he asked, always with that half-mocking accent.

At this moment the well-known ring came to the bell, the well-known feet crossed the floor, and the servant, opening the door, announced, "Colonel Camperdown."

Venetia looked at Ernest.

"You know now," she said, as she went forward to meet him—her hero, her protector, her lover, and her friend; feeling as she laid her hand in his that now she was safe, and that nothing could henceforth harm her.

But Graziella, who, for all her wild words and wicked ways, had really loved Ernest Pierrepont, had a fever that nearly cost her her life; and Ernest, who, when he had lost her forever, found out that he had really loved Venetia, mooned about the world in a broken-hearted way that was by no means affectation, but that was in very truth the Nemesis that generally follows sooner or later on the follies and mistakes of men.

[THE END.]

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